

SCOTT
SMYLER

JEFF
LEMPER



AD.

ATTENTION

BOOK ONE

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A.D.: After Death created by Scott Snyder & Jeff Lemire

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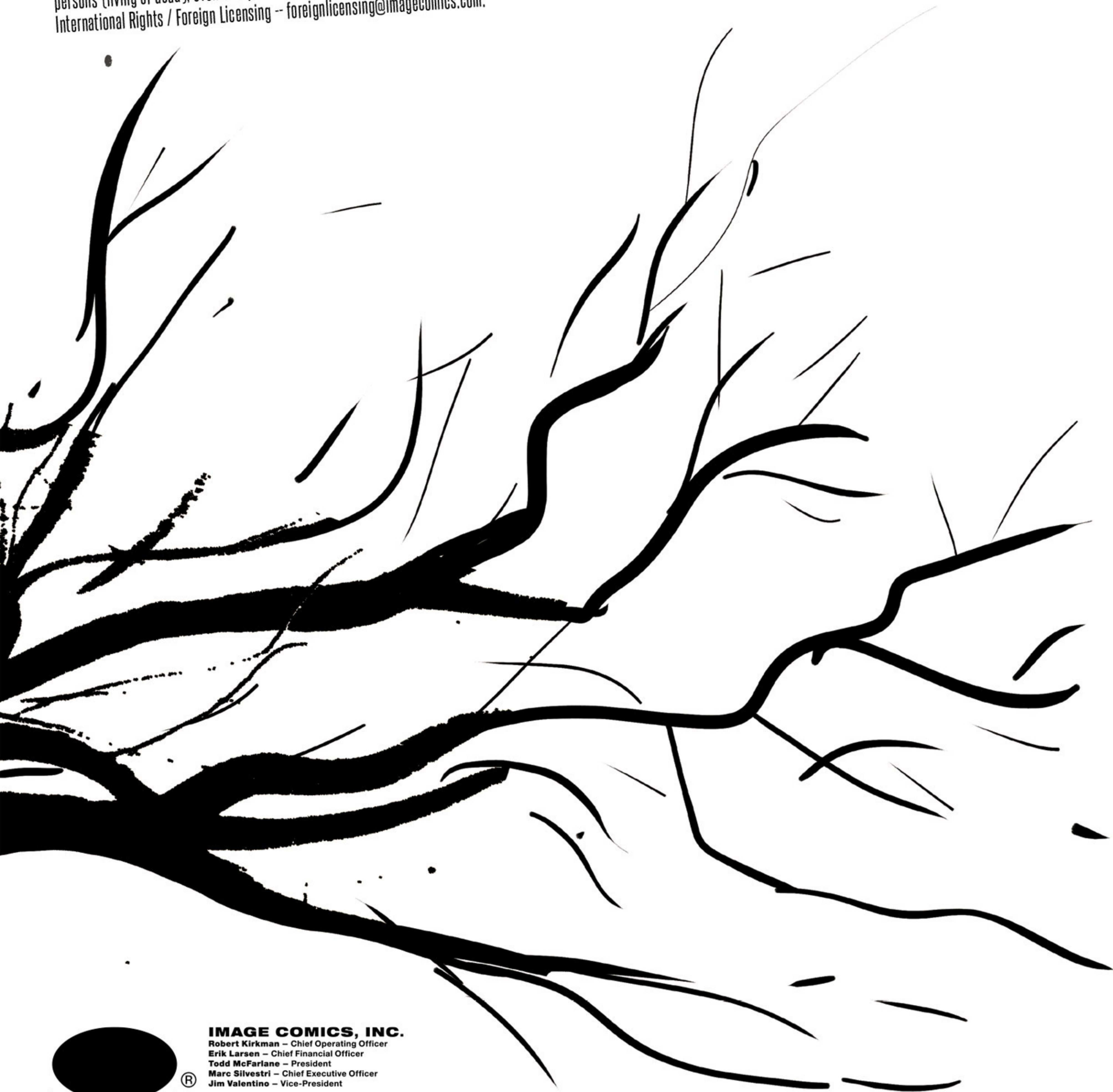
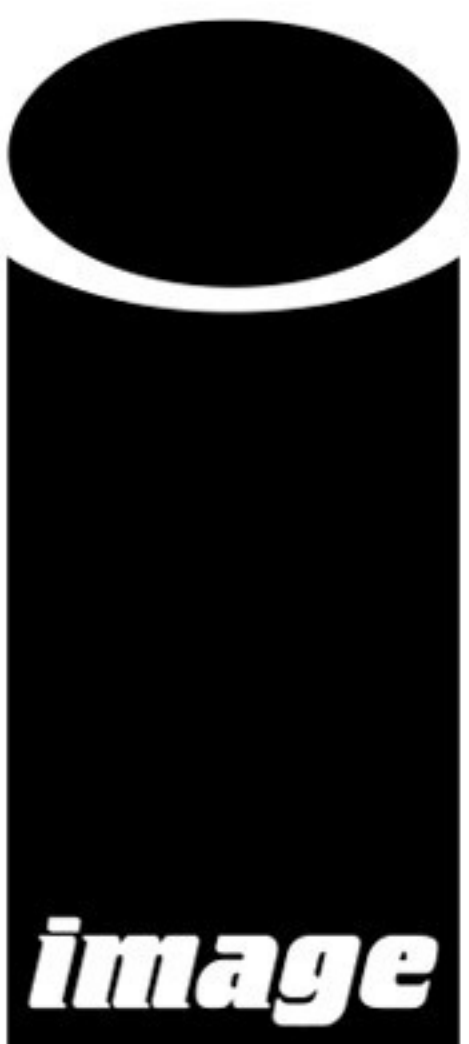
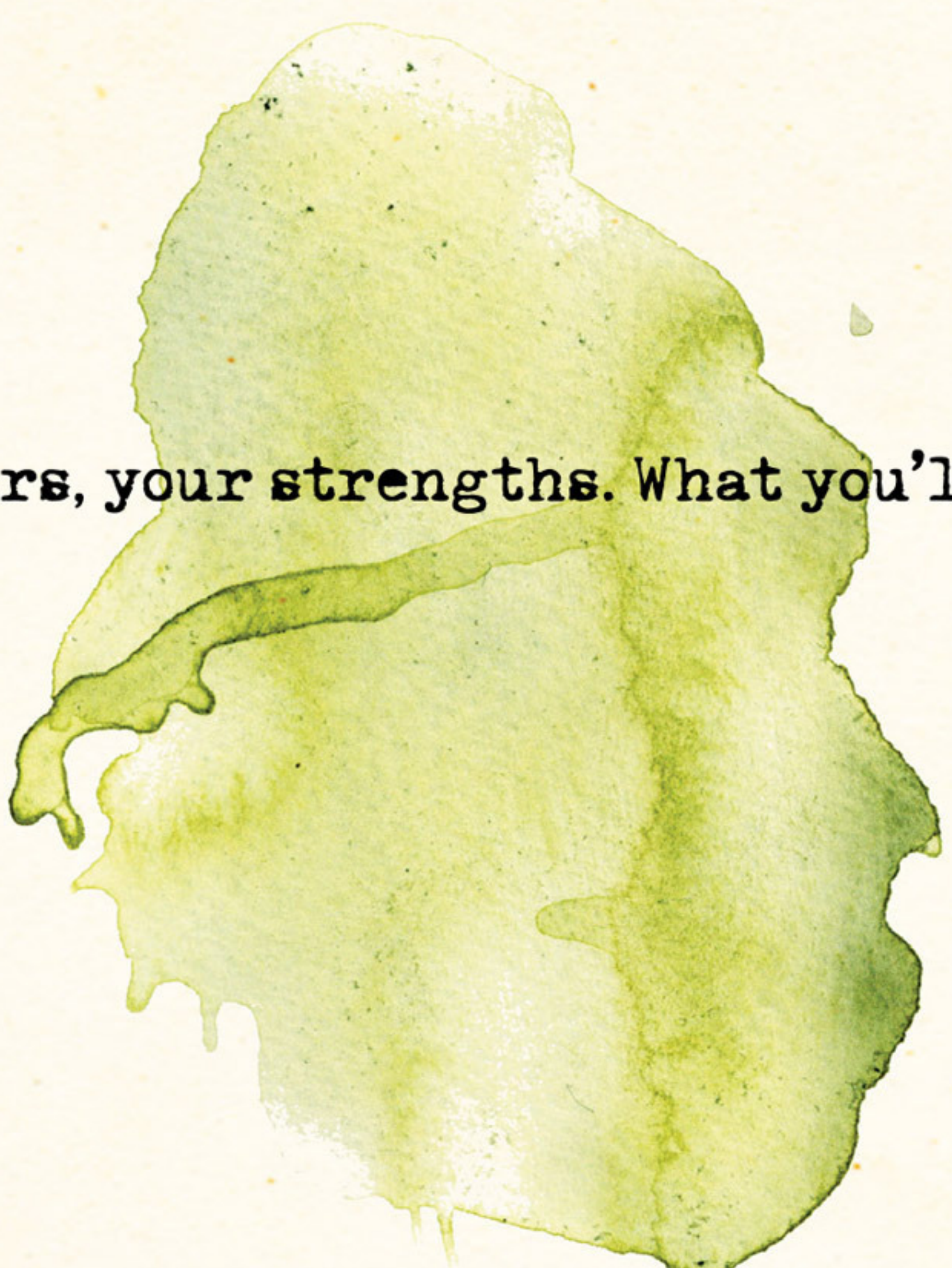


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Someone once told me that all the clues to your
life lie in your first memory.

A large, irregular green watercolor stain is positioned behind the text. It has a mottled appearance with varying shades of green and some darker, more saturated areas, giving it a textured, organic look.

Your fears, your strengths. What you'll struggle with...

...This is mine.

It's January 1982.

I am six years old and sitting in the front seat of my father's Datsun, as we drive along the Florida coast.

It's cold and overcast, and my father is swearing to himself. He keeps looking out the window for some break in the gray, but the sky is immobile, a rusting shipyard of clouds. My mother is in the back. She's worried about me sitting up front. I'm too young to be up here, in the passenger seat, but my father insists.

"He's earned some thrills, Kathy," says my father.

I close my eyes and ask for something fun to happen. Not just for me, but for my father, for my mother in the backseat. I think of the word: "fun." It was one of the first words I learned to spell, and I visualize the letters now; I see us climbing them, ascending the laddered back of the f, scrambling across the top, and then sliding down its canopy into the swooping cradle of the u and up, and down the sloping n...

I open my eyes, but, of course, nothing has changed.

My father is still hunched over the wheel. The sky is still an angry brow. My mother is still nervous and frustrated and watching the road for us. The trees along this stretch of Florida are plain and bare. There were palm trees by our motel, but these look just like the trees at home to me. They're black and wiry and remind me of dead tooth nerves, like in pictures I've seen of rotten teeth at the dentist.

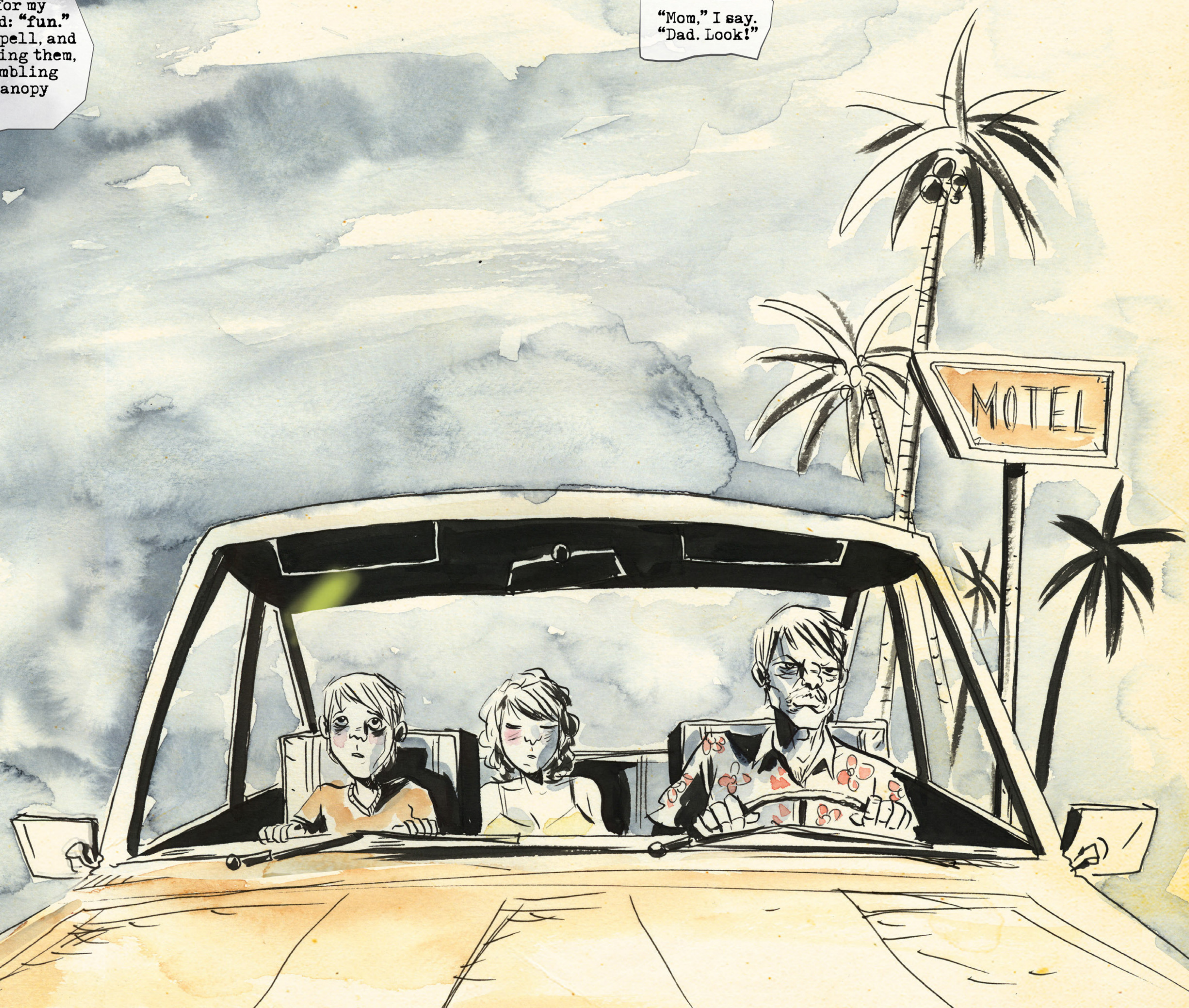
My mother sighs. She's just about to say enough of this--we can all feel it--when suddenly I notice something descending from the gray sky. An object blinking with light.

I press my face to my window.

What is it?

It's small, but flashing green, and it's falling toward us.

"Mom," I say.
"Dad. Look!"





My father took us to Florida on a whim. He literally came home from teaching on a Friday afternoon, appeared in my bedroom doorway, and told me to pack.

"We're taking a vacation," he said. "I mean now. Like, today."

We all needed a break, he said. And he was right--we did. It had been a tough year. The school where my father worked had its budget slashed, and he'd been worried about his job for months. He was an activist; he taught high school physics, but his passion was his elective class series about twentieth-century political protest. Lately, there seemed less and less a place for anything he loved.

My mother was an optometrist and had a small shop in a strip mall near our house. Sometimes I'd stay with her there after school, and we'd have what she called "eyeball fashion shows," during which she'd try on different-colored contact lenses. Colored contacts were still a novelty then, and she'd come out from the back with her eyes closed, and then open them and--surprise--her eyes were purple, or gray, or even yellow, and we'd make up stories about who she was that day. There was a cartoon on TV around that time called *Cryos*, about a moment in the distant future when everyone who'd opted to be cryogenically frozen throughout history was simultaneously woken up, only to find themselves in a world devoid of humans, but filled with dinosaurs and aliens and all sorts of dangers. My mother loved the show as much as I did, the strange sense of adventure to it, and our eyeball fashion shows spoke to this affection. Open your eyes and be reborn!

But her shop was always empty.

On top of this, my parents had been trying to have more children and had suffered a series of miscarriages. Of course, I knew none of this, but I understood it in the way that children do, seeing the color if not the shape of things.

So Florida.

But then it hadn't worked out. The weather was unseasonably frigid, and we spent most of the vacation in the motel room, watching television and playing cards. There was a little patio behind our room where I passed time burying my action figures in the mud, hiding and digging them up with a plastic spoon. I remember one figure coming out with a worm wrapped around her waist.

On the second to last morning, my father couldn't take it anymore, the disappointment of Florida, of all of it, and so we packed up for home. But, before getting on the highway north, he insisted we take a final spin around the area, in case we missed some last, fun thing.

The object in the sky is closer now.

I call to my father again. Tell him to look. Look there!

Finally, he looks.

"Kath. Eye exam?" he says. It's an old family joke. Anytime we see something that isn't to be believed, we say this to my mother, the optometrist.

"Huh. Twenty-twenty," she says, meaning: yes, what you're seeing is there.

As the thing descends, we all see that it's a balloon--but a balloon with some sort of blinking light inside of it. A ribbon dangles from it with a card attached--a small, white sign with red writing on it. We can't read what it says from the expressway, but it's clearly all big letters and exclamation points--something urgent--and we're all fascinated by this.

In no time, the balloon becomes the game we've been waiting to play together all weekend--it's JUST the thing--and we follow its descent from the car as it spins and twirls downward.

"Can you read it, Jonah?" my father says to me, turning the wheel hand over hand. "Cooke family! Eyes on it!"

"I can't read it yet, but it's close! Engage, Daniel, engage!" my mother says, laughing, her face pressed to her window. Her eyes are bright and full of light. I think of our eyeball fashion shows: "And...blue. And...white."

The balloon is right there now! "Get closer!" I say. "Come on, Dad!"

My father actually turns off the expressway and gets onto the interstate so we can follow this balloon.

It's dropping more quickly now, swinging this way and that, updrafts poking at it, pushing it into erratic arcs, and we start estimating where it's going to land. Behind the laundromat! Nonono, it's swinging the other way...it's going to land behind the army navy!

Finally, it vanishes behind a daycare center--my mother and I screaming and pointing--and my father swerves across four empty lanes of traffic to chase it.



It takes us a minute, but we find the balloon in an empty lot across from the daycare. It's caught in a chain-link fence, whipping about in the breeze, and we exit the car and rush over to it without even closing the car doors, like it's a pet we need to free from a thicket.

My father gets it loose and holds the sign so we can see.

If you find this balloon, call the number below and you will win a prize!

Below the message is a phone number.

We look at each other. This is even better than we'd expected, and we are ecstatic. A prize. My mother hugs me--and you spotted it, Jonah!

Miraculously, there is a half payphone in the lot, and my father hurries over. All of this feels right, like this is the reward for the chilling weekend, for Florida, for everything over the last year. Everything.



My father calls the number.

As he waits for the pickup, he combs his hair with his hand, like this is a job interview. Then he looks at my mother and me and winks.

Eventually, someone picks up and my father, full of enthusiasm, explains that we've found the prize balloon, that our family has it here, with us--he looks around--somewhere off Route 4. In his hand, the balloon pulses erratically, like a dotted message from some faraway land.

A plastic bag blows by. I hear my father repeat himself, slower and louder. The next few minutes are confusing, and less clear to me looking back, but what soon becomes apparent is that the balloon was part of a contest put on by an elementary school in New York. A bunch of students let balloons go from the campus, with this same placard attached--the school number--and the goal was to see whose balloon flew the farthest. A woman from the school is telling my father this.

My father laughs, looking at the balloon, the ribbon in his fist. "Well, clearly this balloon won," he says. "It must be a thousand-mile trip. Hard to believe such a thing is even possible." Hell, he teaches science and he can't believe it. It defies physics.

"Can you believe it, Cooke family?" he says, covering the receiver for no reason.

My mother and I are laughing. No, we can't believe it.

I am thinking about the prize. I hope it's money, Not for me, but for my father. For my mother. I don't understand money all the way yet, but I know it makes things lighter. That's the word that keeps coming to me. The word I've pictured all year. "Lighter."

Then my father's face begins to change.

"What is it, Daniel?" my mother says.

Moments from now, what we'll learn is that, yes, our balloon's flight sounds incredible, but the thing is, the contest was over weeks ago. The winning balloon made it to New Jersey. Trenton, to be specific. Farther than any balloon before it.

"Trenton," my father says. "We're in Florida."

The woman explains that she understands this, but that the contest is over. The prize--a personal video game system--was already given away.

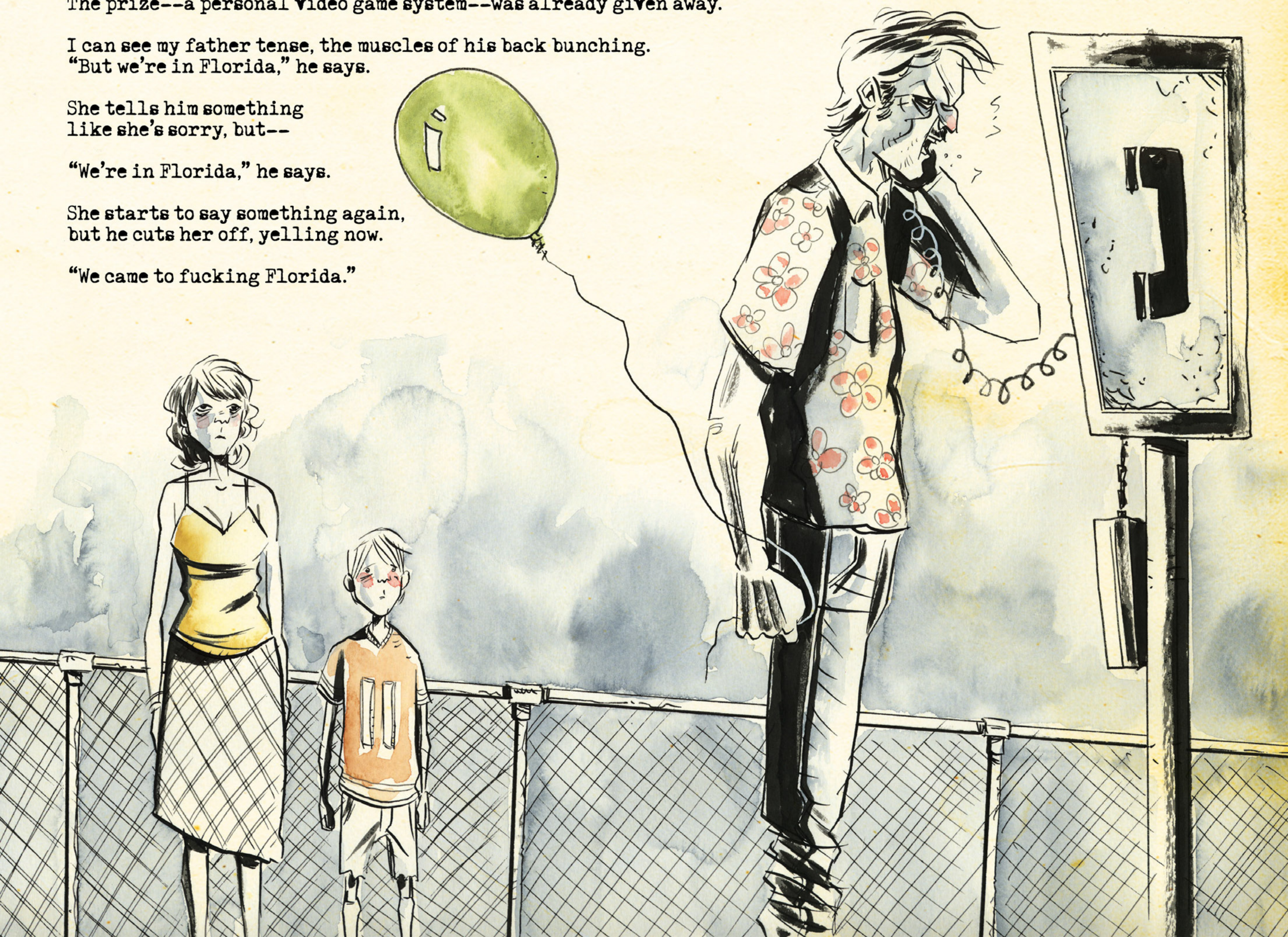
I can see my father tense, the muscles of his back bunching. "But we're in Florida," he says.

She tells him something like she's sorry, but--

"We're in Florida," he says.

She starts to say something again, but he cuts her off, yelling now.

"We came to fucking Florida."



And she's talking to him, trying to explain, and he's screaming, cursing about how that game system is ours. About how he'll drive up to New Jersey and prove it, how we deserve that goddam system, and that's when my mother begins to shake.

She falls to the ground like something shut off, no hands out to break the fall, no sound, just goes limp. Falls. Her head hits first.

I yell to my father, but he doesn't hear. He's screaming into the phone. In his hand is a balloon that has traveled a thousand miles-- its journey a mystery, something that exists outside and above us all. It pulses green.

My mother begins to shake, her head thudding against the concrete. I am screaming and my father is screaming.



That's my first
memory.

I think about it
often, but have no
idea what it means.

I wonder what it
says about my life.

And wonder what
my last memory
will be...



NOW.

CHUNK

≡HUFF≡
≡HUFF≡

COME
ON.
MOVE!



MOVE
BEFORE
THEY--

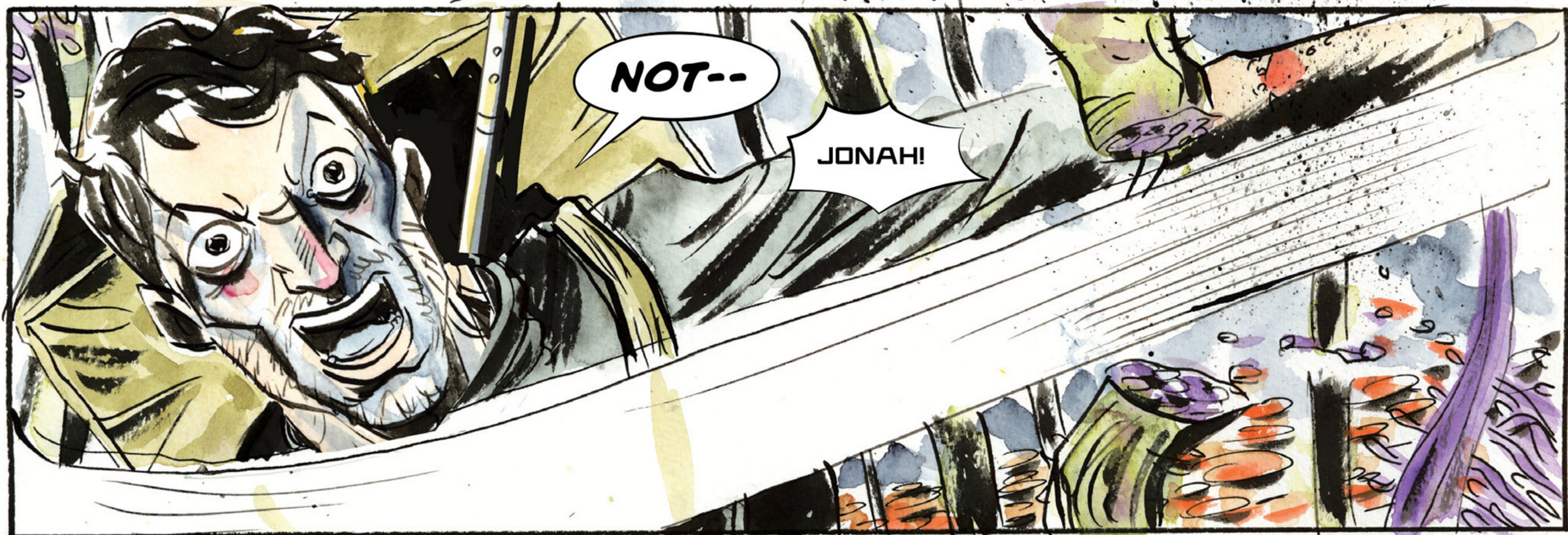
ZZZZT...JONAH
COOKE, IS
ZZZZT...YOU?

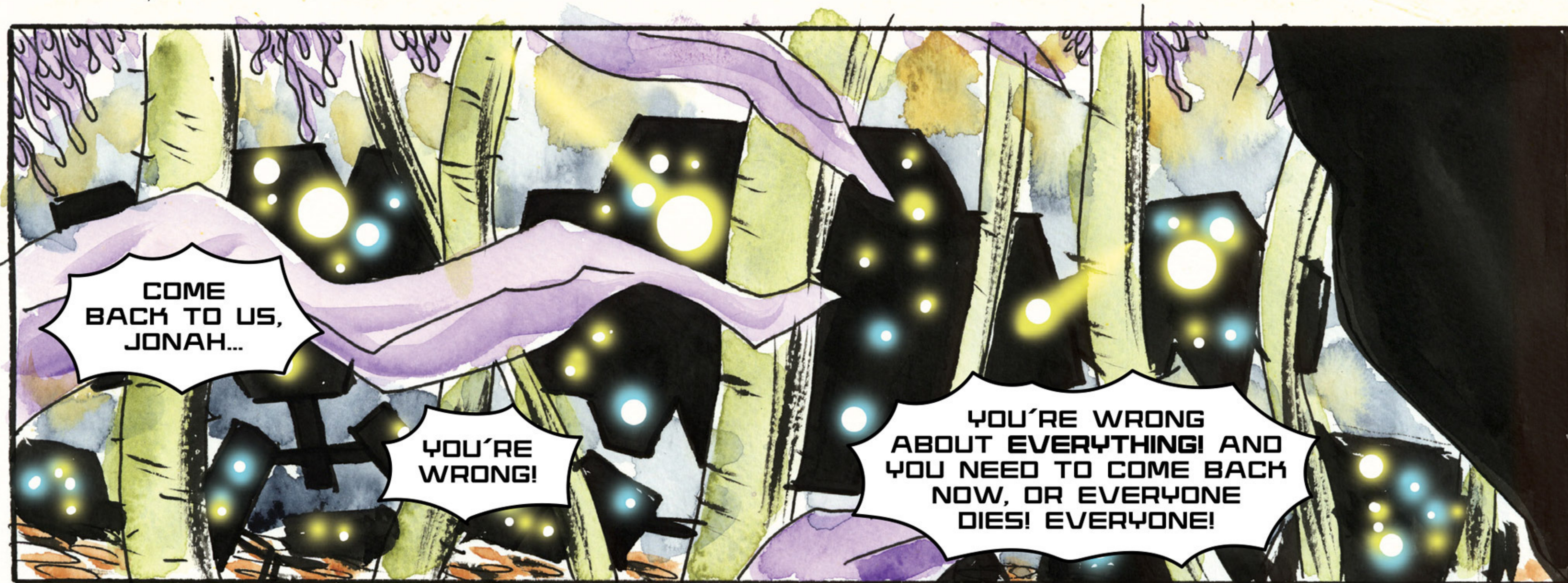


YES! YES,
COME IN!
ARE YOU
THERE?!

I'M
COMING DOWN!
COME IN, DAMMIT!
I'M NOT ALONE! DO
YOU READ?! AND I
THINK I'M BEING
FOLL--







COME
BACK TO US,
JONAH...

YOU'RE
WRONG!

YOU'RE WRONG
ABOUT EVERYTHING! AND
YOU NEED TO COME BACK
NOW, OR EVERYONE
DIES! EVERYONE!

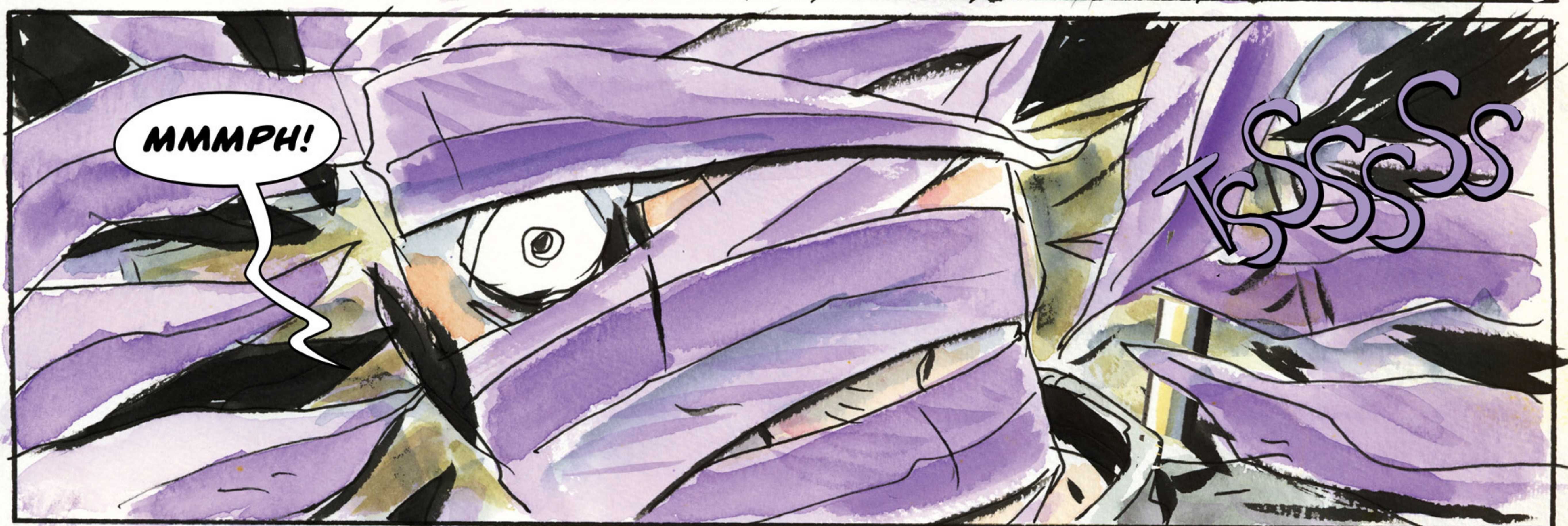


NO! NO,
YOU'RE LYING!
LEAVE ME ALONE!
I KNOW WHO I
AM! I KNOW
WHO I--



AAAAGH!

TSSSS



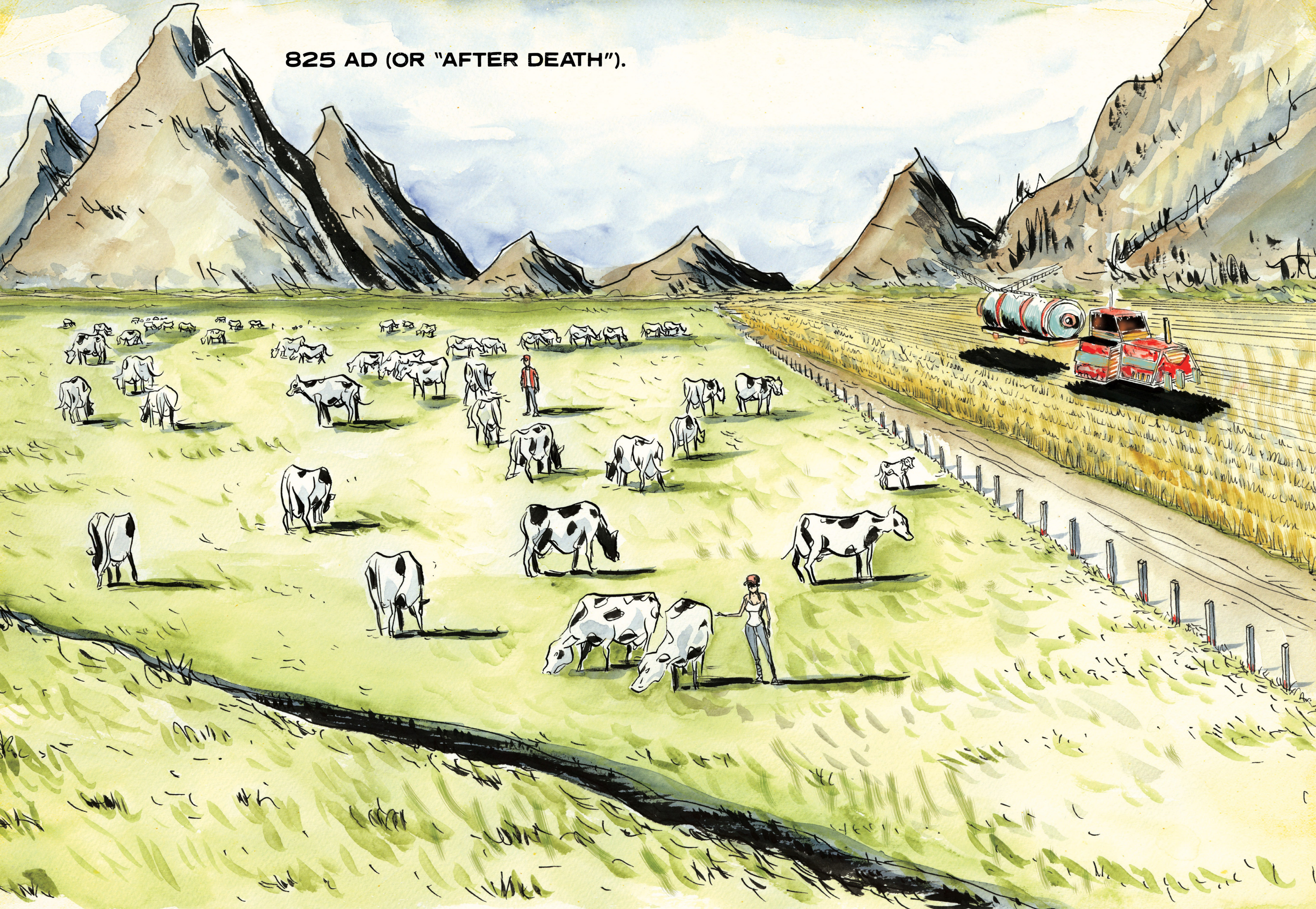
MMMPH!

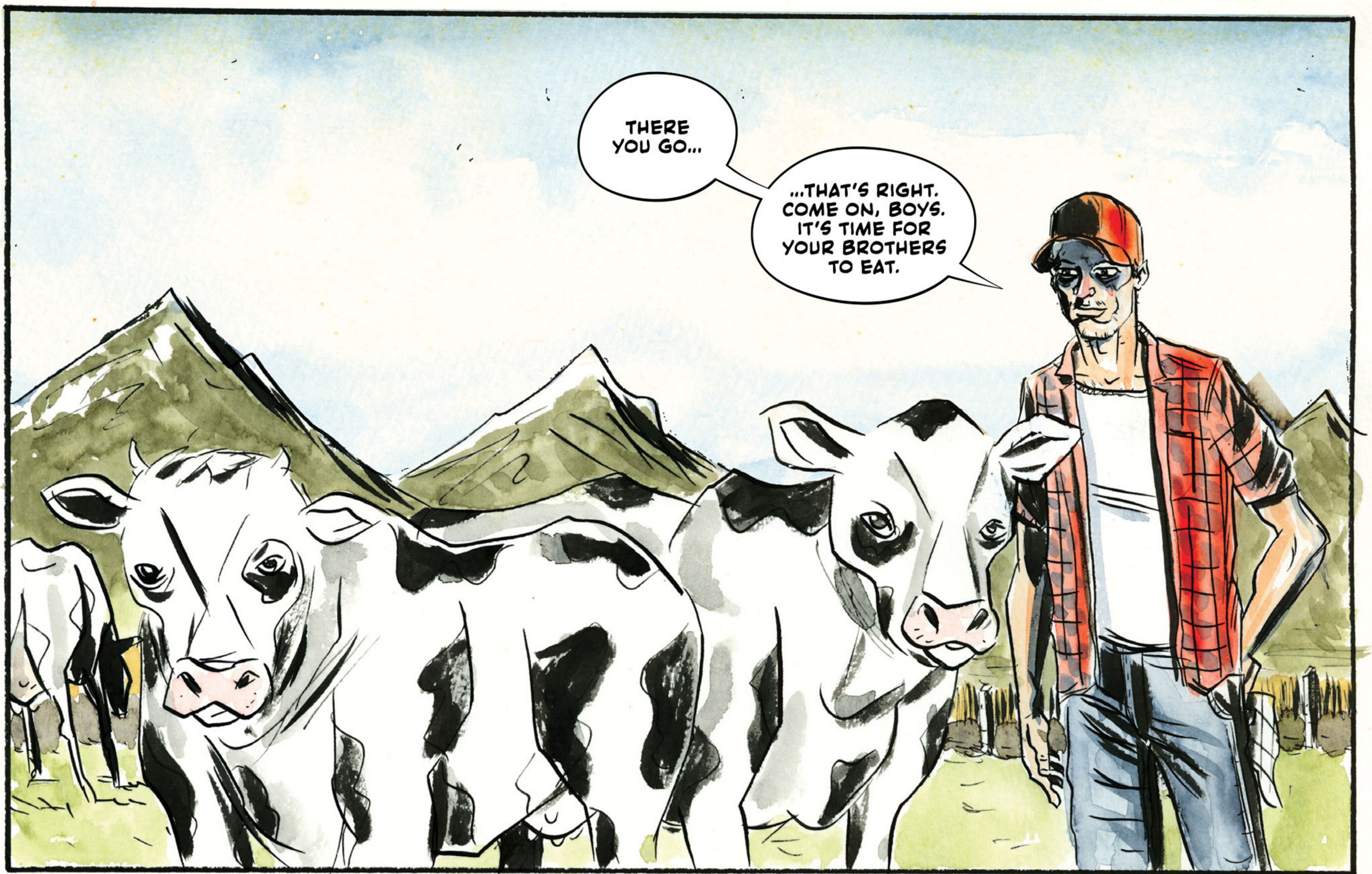
TSSSSS

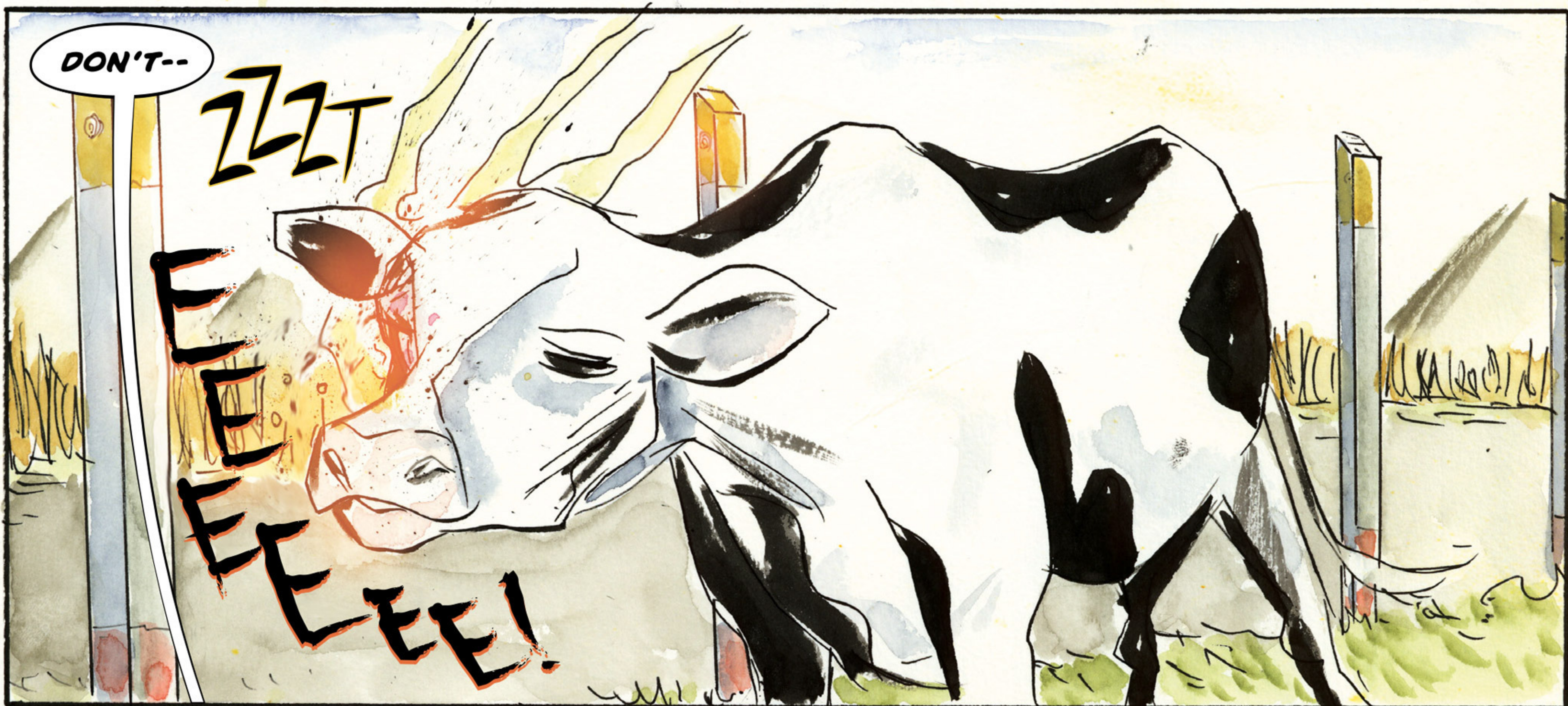
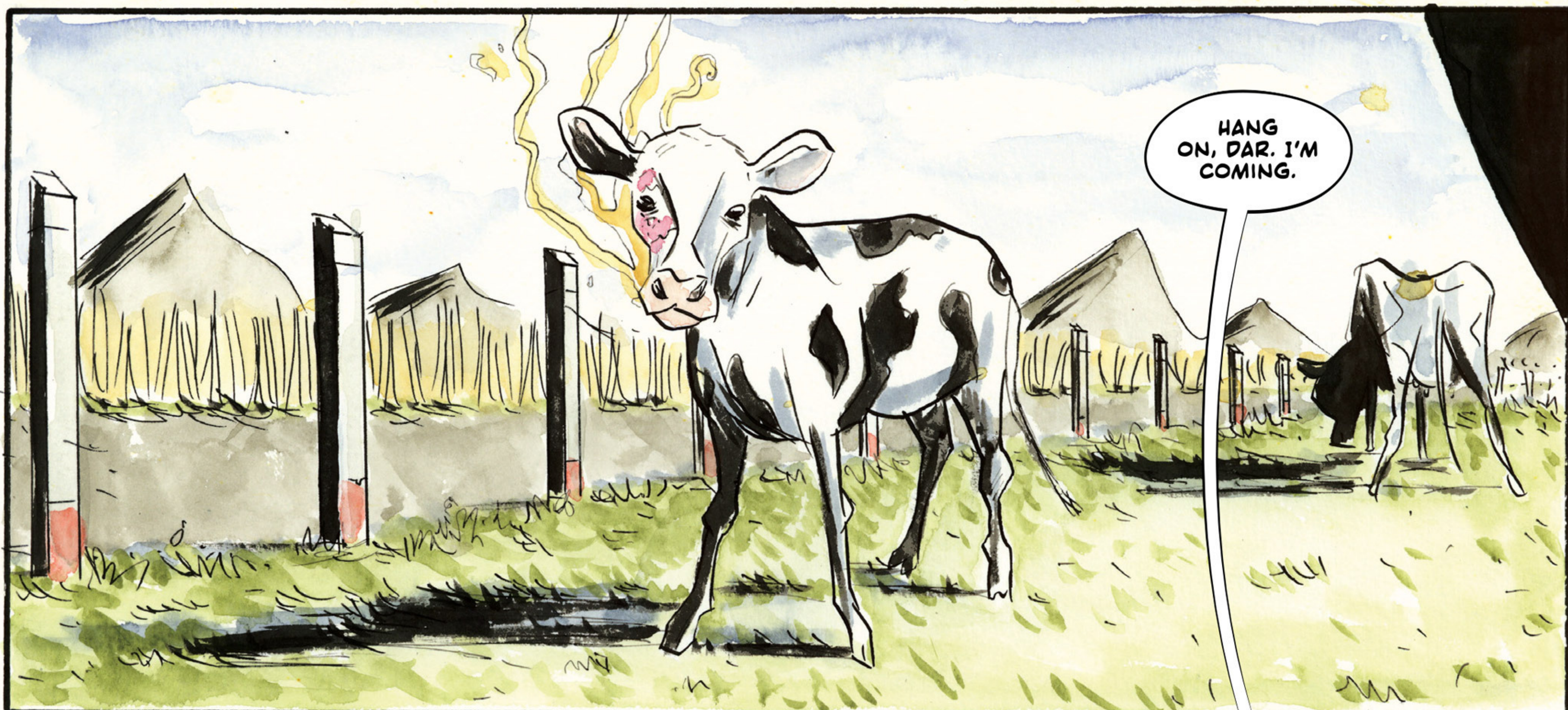


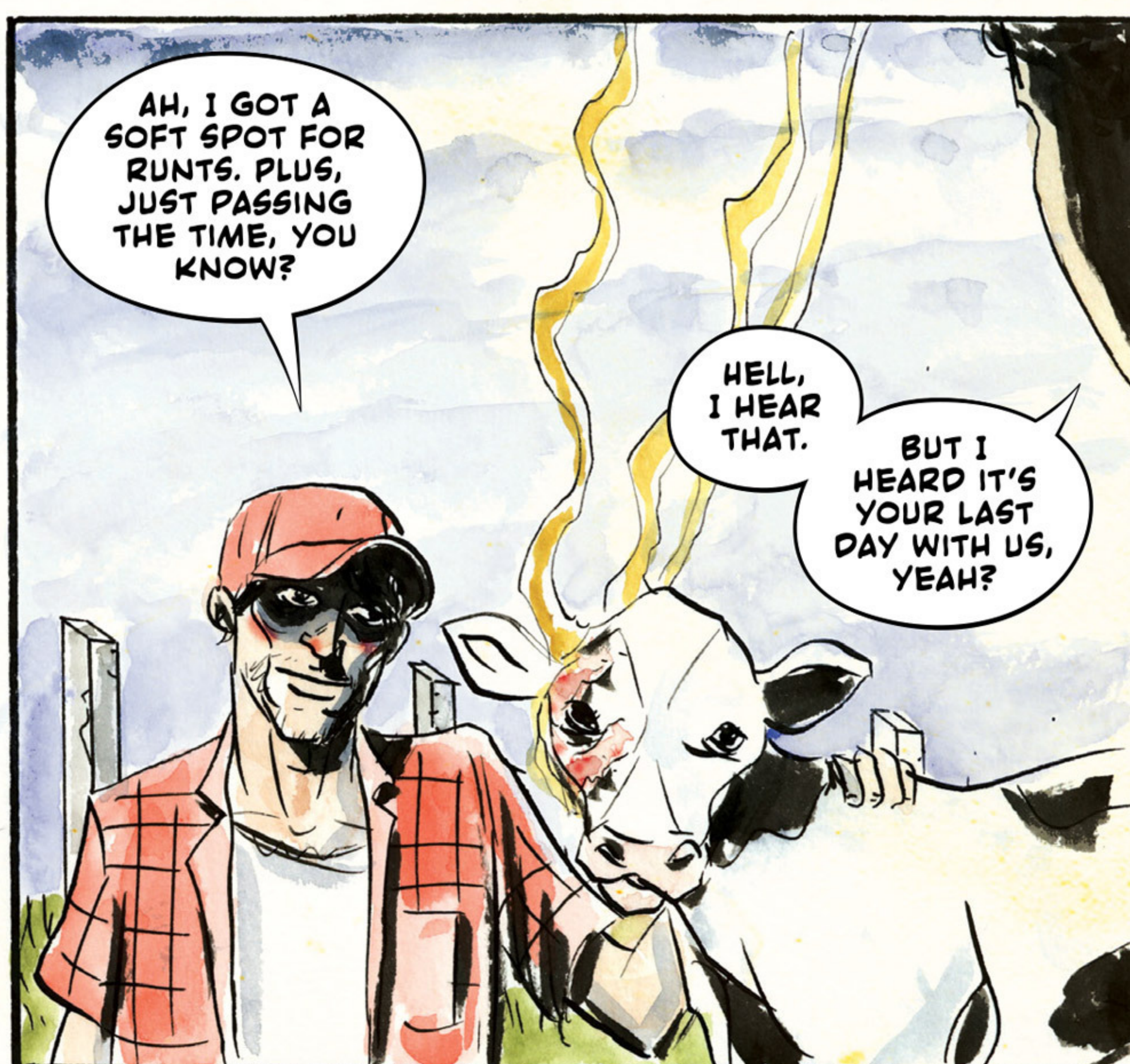
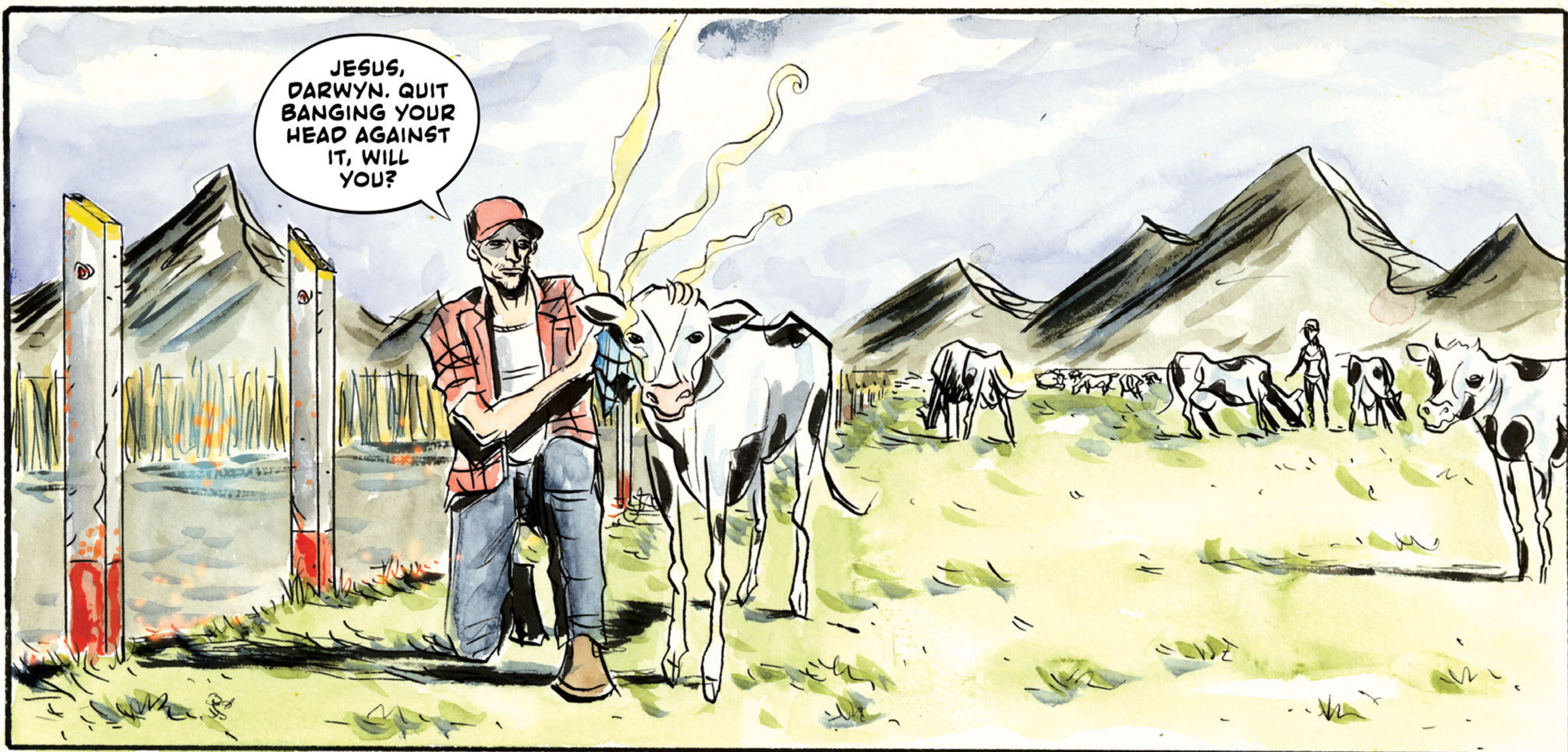
PART ONE
THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

825 AD (OR "AFTER DEATH").













I STILL REMEMBER YOUR FIRST WEEK HERE. RUNT LIKE THIS ONE. YOU TRIED TO GET HIM OVER THE FENCE, YOU RECALL?

YOU DIDN'T KNOW *HEHE* YOU THOUGHT IT WAS JUST THE FENCE. NOT THE ENZYME LOOP, TOO. YOU DIDN'T REALIZE, TO GET AN ANIMAL OUT OF HERE YOU'D HAVE TO CHANGE ITS WHOLE INTERNAL CHEMISTRY.



TAKES WEEKS. SHOTS, BLOODWORK. HELL, YOU'D STILL HAVE TO BRING GRASS FROM THIS PASTURE OUT. LIKE GROW IT, SEED BY SEED.

BUT *HEHE* BUT THERE'S YOU, DRIVING THE DAMN RUNT BACK HERE AFTER YOU TOOK IT, TEARING UP THE ROAD, TRYING TO SAVE THE THING. *HEHE*



FUCKING THING THREW UP ALL OVER MY TRUCK.

HA! AND AFTER ALL OF IT--

--DIED ANYHOW! AND IT SHIT ON MY SEAT WHEN IT DID. ALL OVER THE PLACE! HAHA!



FIFTY YEARS. *SIGH* TIME PASSES DIFFERENTLY.

THAT IT DOES.

MILLIE SAYS IT'S LIKE FASTER AND SLOWER AT ONCE. "DIFFERENT TIDES OVERLAPPING..." SHE GETS SMARTER EVERY CYCLE. NOT ME. YOU THINK YOU'LL COME BACK AROUND?

ALREADY PUT IN. SO SEE YOU IN ABOUT, WHAT, EIGHTY YEARS?

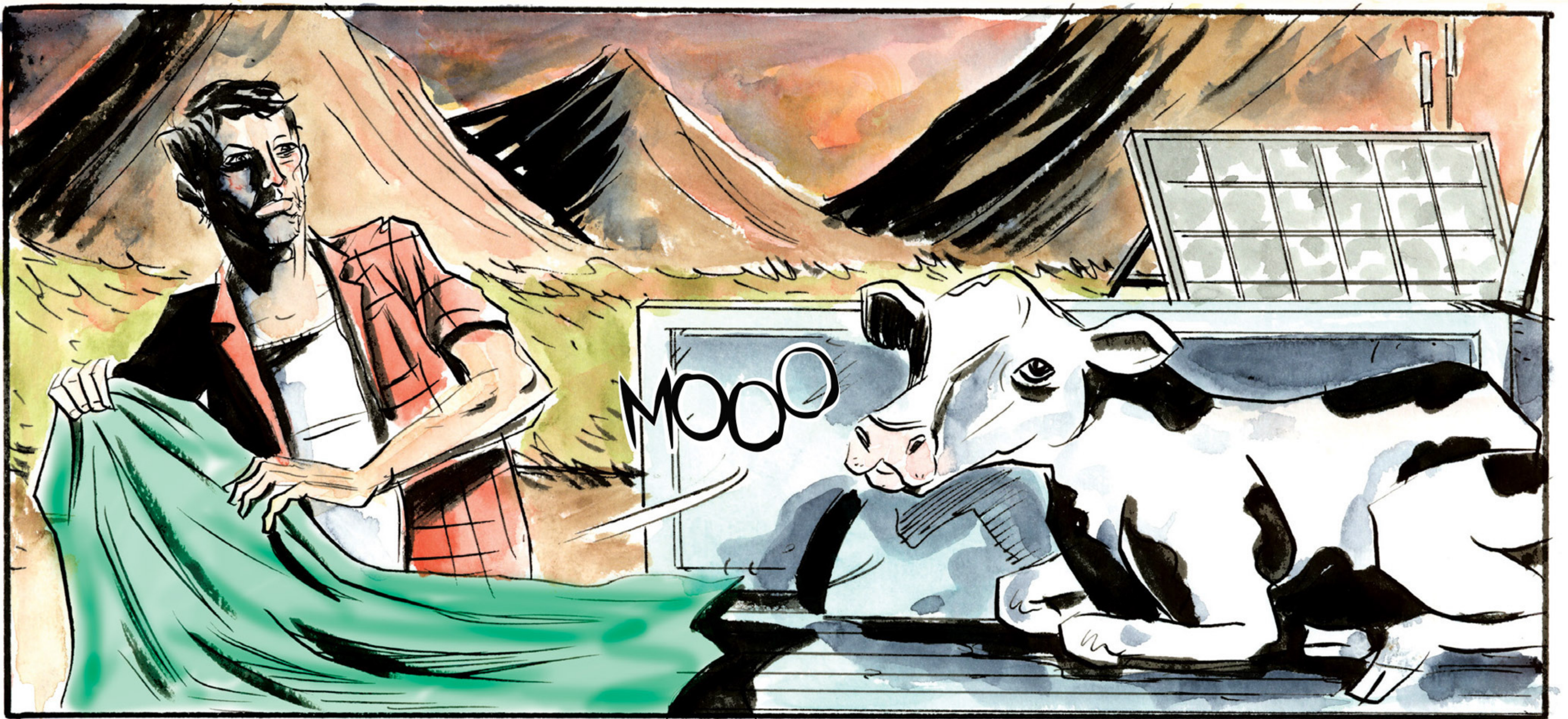


ENOUGH TIME FOR YOU TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO ACTUALLY STEAL A RUNT ANIMAL, EH?

HA. EXACTLY.









THIS
SIDE
UP
↑
FRAGILE

...YOU'LL
FIT RIGHT
IN...



WITH ALL
MY OTHER
STOLEN
THINGS.

Imagine something for me.

Imagine for a moment that you are a pygmy. You are part of the Aku tribe in West African Congo. You are dark skinned and very small, about four-foot-eleven. I am, too. You and I, we're together. We're walking through some of the lushest, greenest earth. We're part of that group--the famous one.

The one that found the first signs of it.

It's morning in the rainforest, and we're making our way through the brush. Above us, the leaves chatter with rain. There are five of us (or so the reports said), and we've known this place our whole lives--every tall, dark oil palm tree is familiar, every flesh-pink okoume. We have a goat with us. We're exercising the animal because it has been sick, but now it's well, and excited to be well, pulling at the braided tether, splashing through puddles. We pass mahogany trees and kapoks, talking and laughing, and then, suddenly, we stop.

Because on the ground in front of us lies something odd. This...small patch of gray. A pale, splintery spot about ten feet across. At the center, a tomato frog lies dead, curled in on itself like a pointless question mark. The understory is dead as well.

What really makes us stop, though, is the dryness. The ground in this patch is dry as bone. We watch the rain drum against the dirt inside the patch. It hisses and disappears, and the ground is dry again.

Before we can stop it, you or I, the goat pulls free and runs across the patch. Our leader yells and tries to grab it, knowing instinctively--knowing as we all know--that something is terribly, terribly wrong with this spot. It already seems to have grown by a yard on all sides (how could it have done that? Are we imagining?). But the goat is inside now, rushing ahead, just happy to be alive.

The thing is, I am not someone you'd expect to have been important to the story of the cure for death. I'm Jonah Cooke. And before it all happened, I was no one extraordinary. I was forty years old and lived on the north shore of Long Island, in a small condominium, the kind of place that didn't allow you to paint the walls or hammer into them. To hang pictures, you had to use a sticky gum that melted in the heat. The hedges were always full of cobwebs and punched-in wasps' nests. I worked at a modular-home company, about ten minutes down the freeway from the complex. We sold high-end free-build homes and additions. My office overlooked the showroom floor, where we kept an array of homes to tour, houses standing shoulder to shoulder like an army waiting to invade your neighborhood. I was unmarried when it all started.

The point is, I wasn't special. I was a no one.

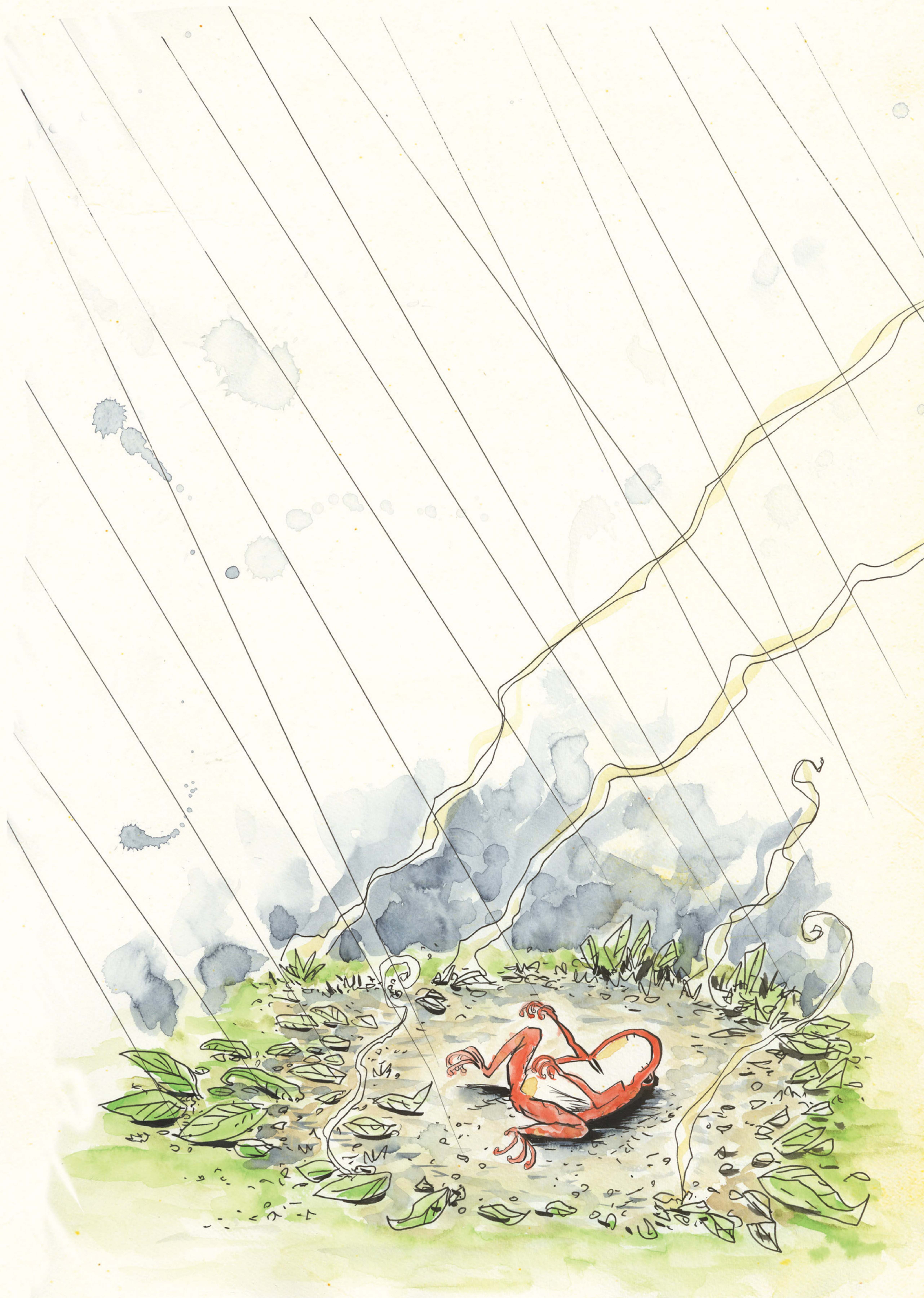
But it's all my fault.

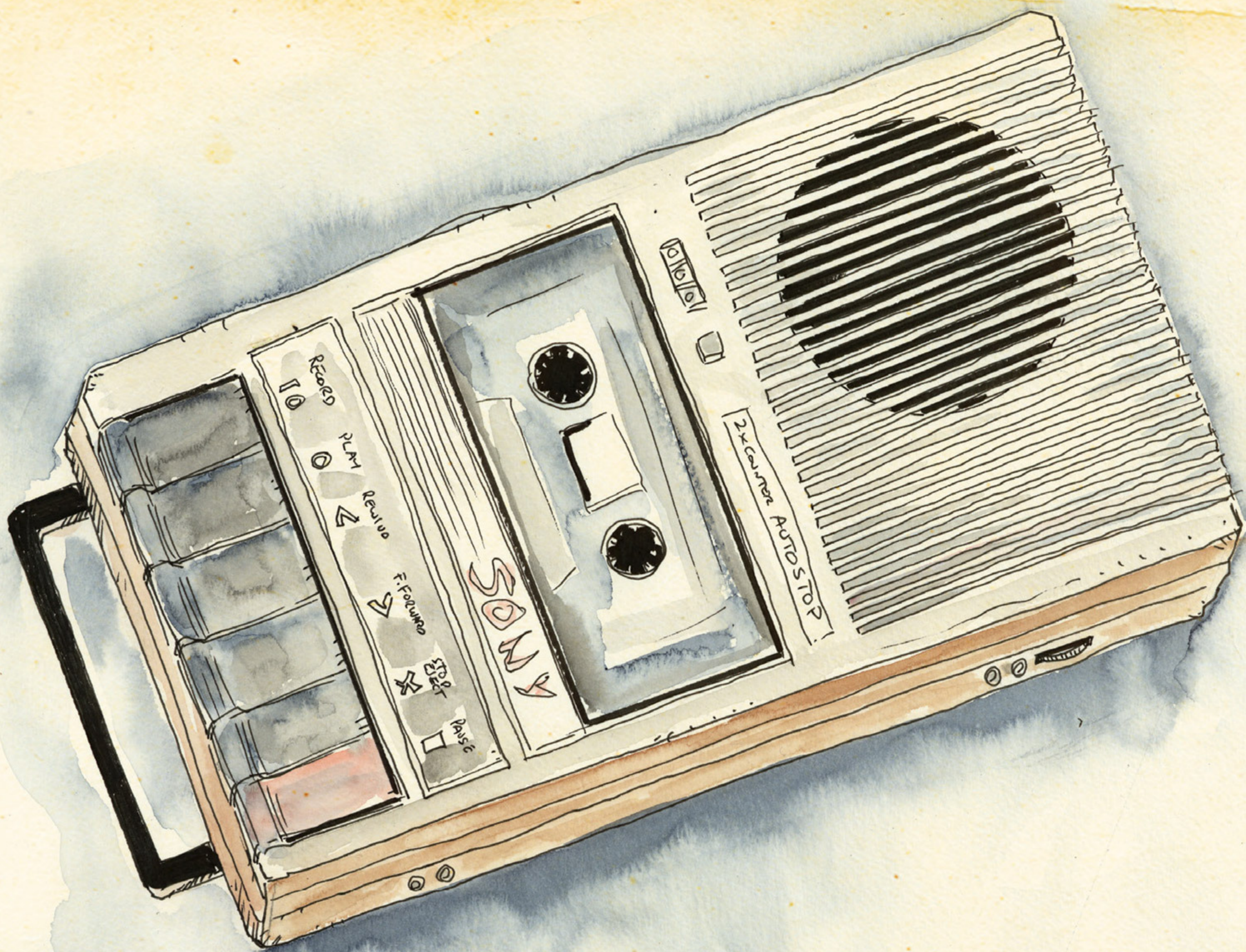
This place in the mountains.

The way things are.

All of it.

Because I stole the wrong thing.





The
first thing I ever
stole was a tape record-
er. A 1990 Sony Quad. It cost
\$34.99 at the B and D Superstore
and came with twelve cassettes for
sixty hours of recording, more than
any other tape recorder on the market. I
was twelve years old and just about to
start junior high. I'd never stolen any-
thing before in my life--I'd never even
thought about stealing anything, not a
piece of candy or a comic book. Nothing.
Sometimes I think I can trace every-
thing that's happened since back to
that tape recorder. Not just what's
happened to me, in my life, but
everything. All the death.
All the lives spared...
all of it. \$34.99 at
B and D.



At twelve years old, I couldn't really have told you why I wanted the tape recorder so badly. I could have told you what I wanted it for, just not why my need for it was so great. What I wanted it for was simple. I wanted the thing to record dinners with my mother and father. Ever since my mother's fall that day in Florida, I'd taken to recording my family life. I kept a journal at night, marking down the mundane things that happened each day. "Went to school. Argued with Frank Tsu about whether it's better to get unlimited lives before facing the boss on level..." And so on. I'm sure many kids do this, keep journals and such. But for me, there was something imperative about it.

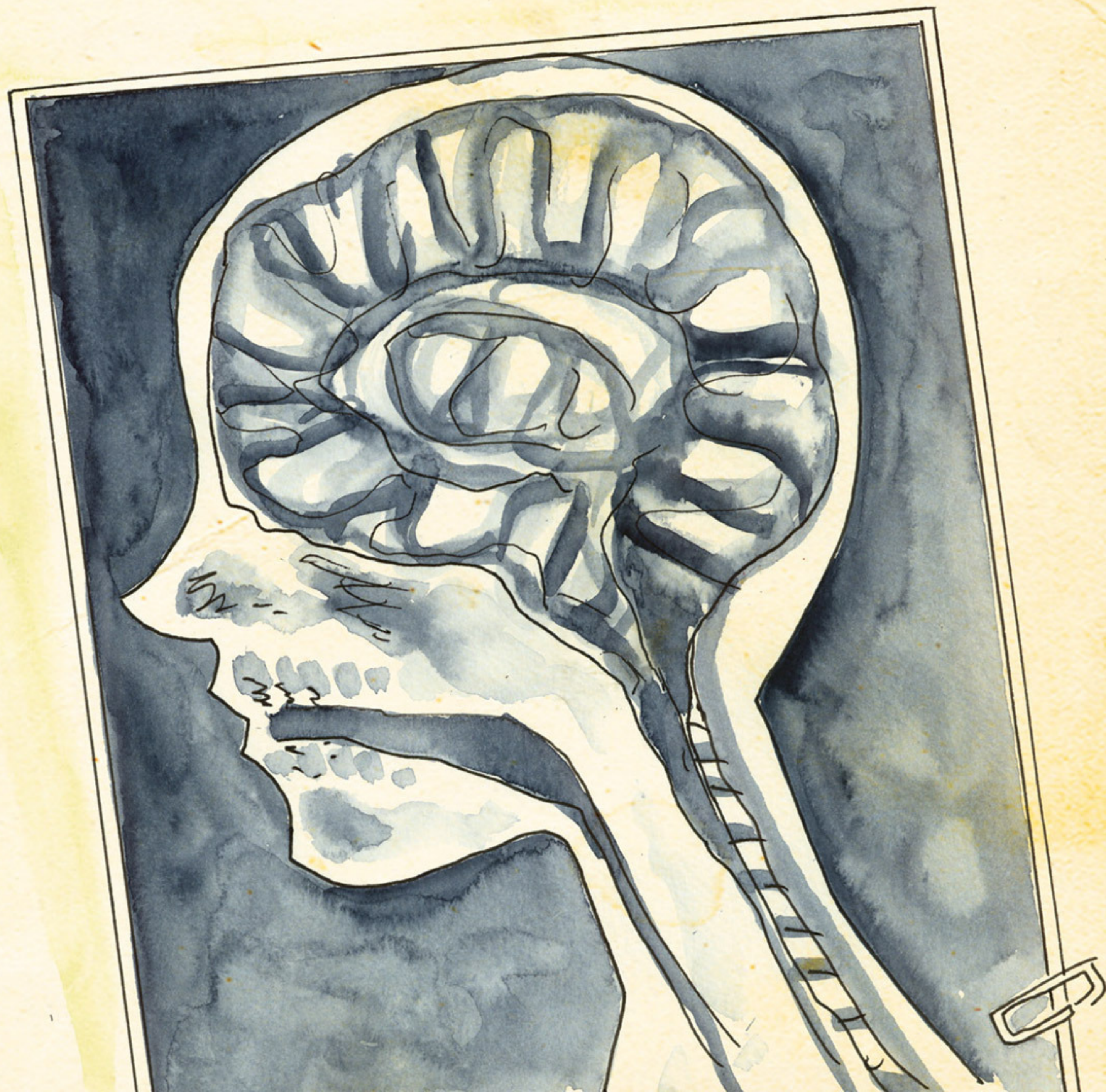
See, in the weeks after my mother's first fall, back in Florida, she'd fallen two more times. Once at work and once in the pharmacy. The second time, she'd fractured her skull and come home with part of her head shaved bald. The months following those three falls had been awful, full of tests, CAT scans, and MRIs. Blood tests. I developed all sorts of ticks. Nervous behaviors not worth getting into here. The testing went on for a year, and despite the reassuring things we told each other, we all expected the worst—even me, at six years old. It was as though we'd crossed the border into some terrible country, my mother, father, and me, some hidden, brutal place that would never let us back home.

And then, miraculously, it all turned out to be nothing.

Test after test came back clear. My mother simply had a blood deficiency. It was easily fixable. She needed to take vitamin D, change her diet.

Her diet.

That was it.





For a
while, she
and my father seemed
dazed by the news;
they literally looked
like they'd been roughed
up by the blast of good
fortune--their faces
slack and pale, hair askew.
Then the reality settled
in, and life between the
three of us became happier
than it had ever been.

Every Wednesday,
my father took my
mother out to a
Mexican chain
place they'd gone on
their first date
They'd come home tipsy,
sometimes wearing the
tiny sombreros that
came in their
drinks strapped
to their
chins.

My mother cut hours and spent more time with me. Fridays, after school, we made a point to go exploring together along the coast, past the old farmlands out to the big houses on the water. The New England, shingle-style houses all sea gray and white trim. These were multi-million-dollar homes--compounds, really--but now that the storms were getting worse, and the shoreline was vulnerable and devalued, they were left abandoned most of the year. There'd been a big project to build a barrier out of defunct train cars, sinking them to make a reef--but it'd only just started when one of the first big storms rolled through and proved how useless the whole thing would be. Some of the houses were lifted and moved farther from the water, put on stilts. Others were left where they were.

My mother and I would drive around these properties, and if anyone came out to check on us, the help or whoever, we'd say we were lost, or even just peel away. When no one was home, we'd picnic on the lawns, maybe even go inside, if the doors were unlocked (which, stunningly, they often were, as nearly all had live-in help who ran errands most of the day). There was something sad and wonderful about these homes, these lonely palaces along the water with their huge glass walls reflecting the violent, rising coast. Standing in the surf on their stilts like sea captains' wives holding their skirts above their ankles as they watched the ocean. They were full of art, too, some notable, some brand new, none of it looked at.

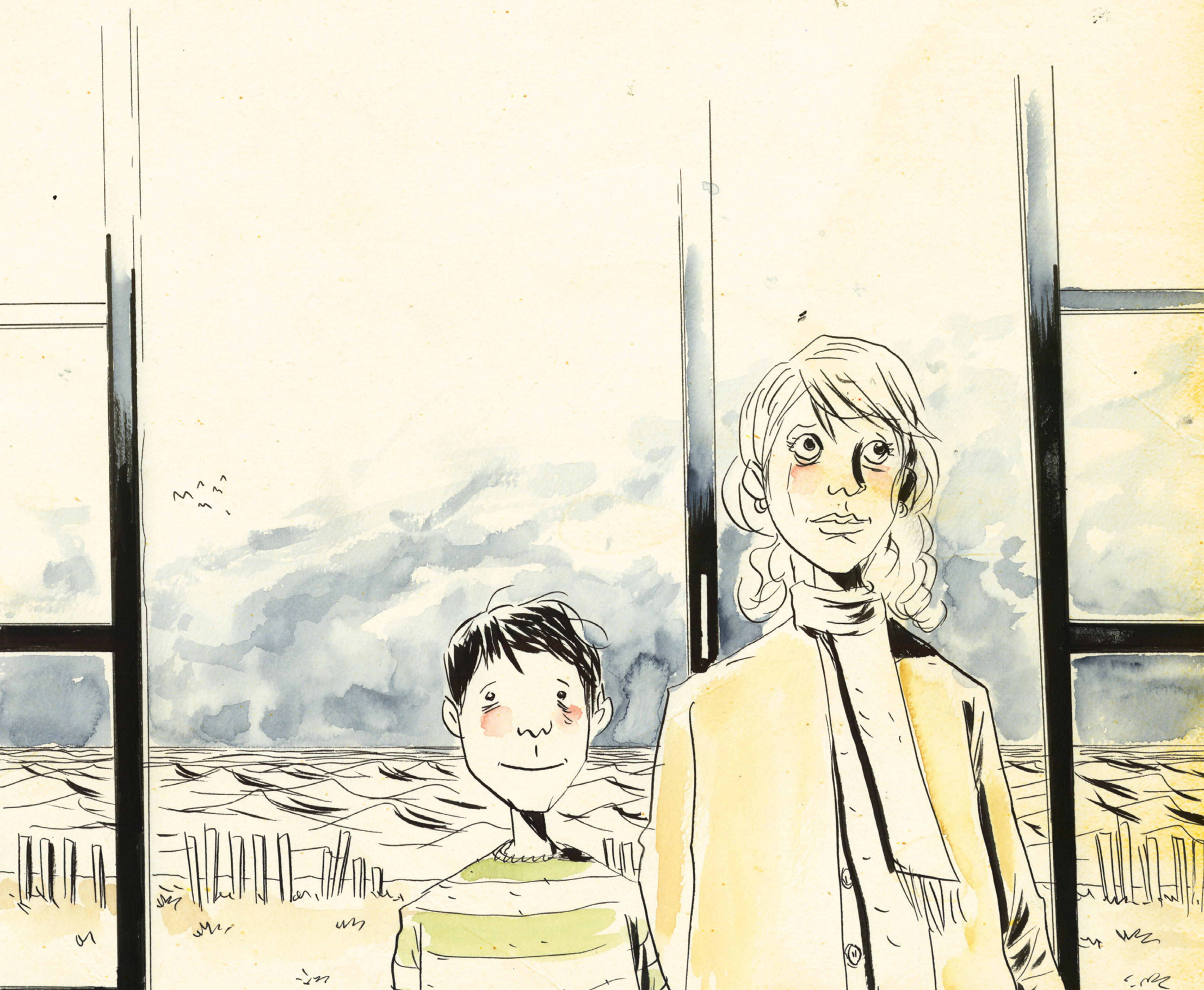
Each home was a different story we were part of. In the oldest, most classical of them, my mother and I were heirs to oil fortunes. We penned letters to relatives in Europe, obscure aunts and uncles who were all after our money. In more contemporary homes, we were mother and son architects who built strange and misunderstood buildings around the world.

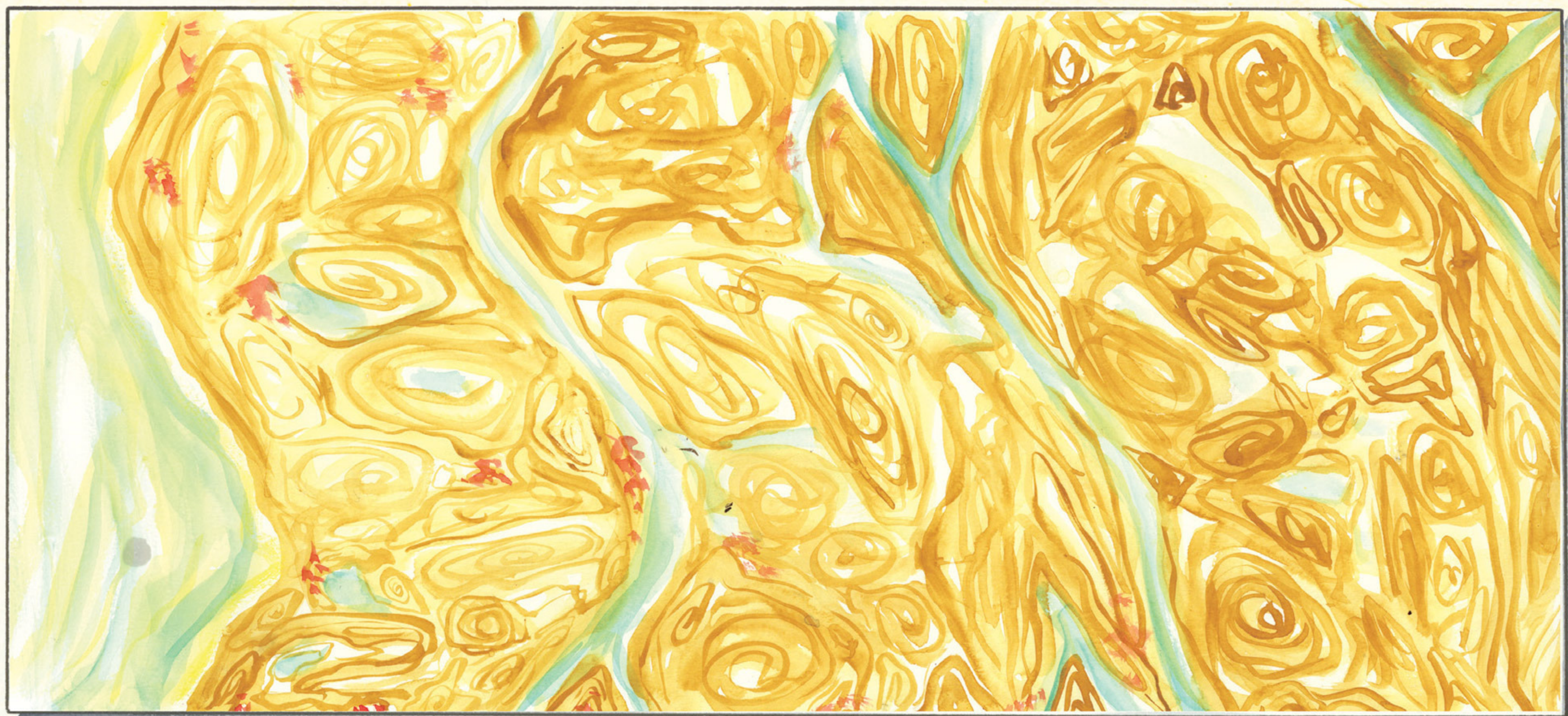


The one we both liked best we called the EGG HOUSE.

It was an ultra contemporary, curving glass walls lined with steel and marble, floating staircases everywhere. The library was an actual elevator shaft of books. The whole place was pale and filled with light and it somehow felt at once utterly complete and totally unformed, like the inside of a cleaned-out egg.

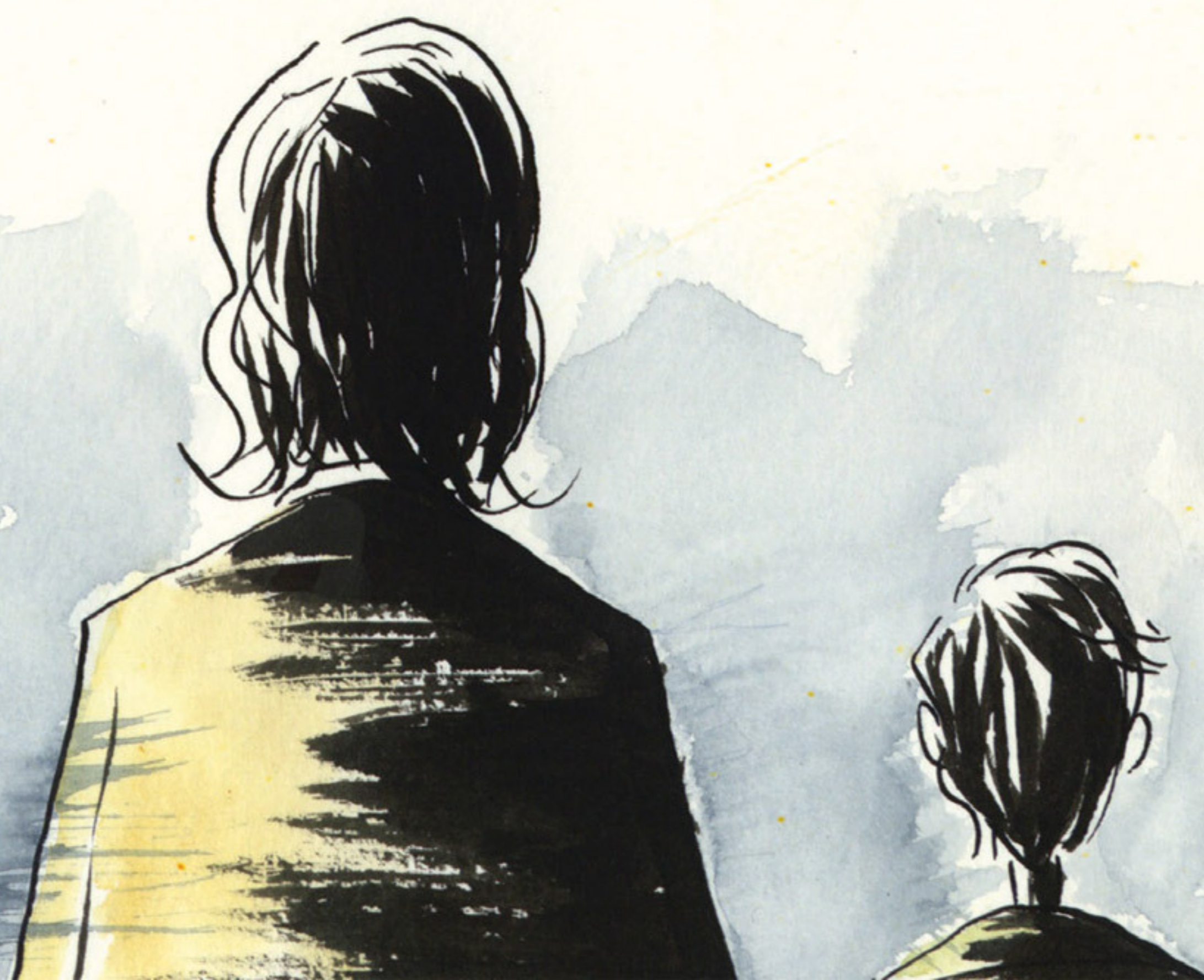
The house had a single caretaker, an older, stooped man my mother and I called "the Russian," for the fur hat he wore when it was chilly out. He lived in quarters at the west edge of the property and kept a strict routine for himself during the week. He always went to town on the same day, at the same time (Tuesday at noon), and, strangely, though he locked the front door with a key ring he kept on his belt, he always left the sliding glass doors wide open, and my mother and I went in through the screens.

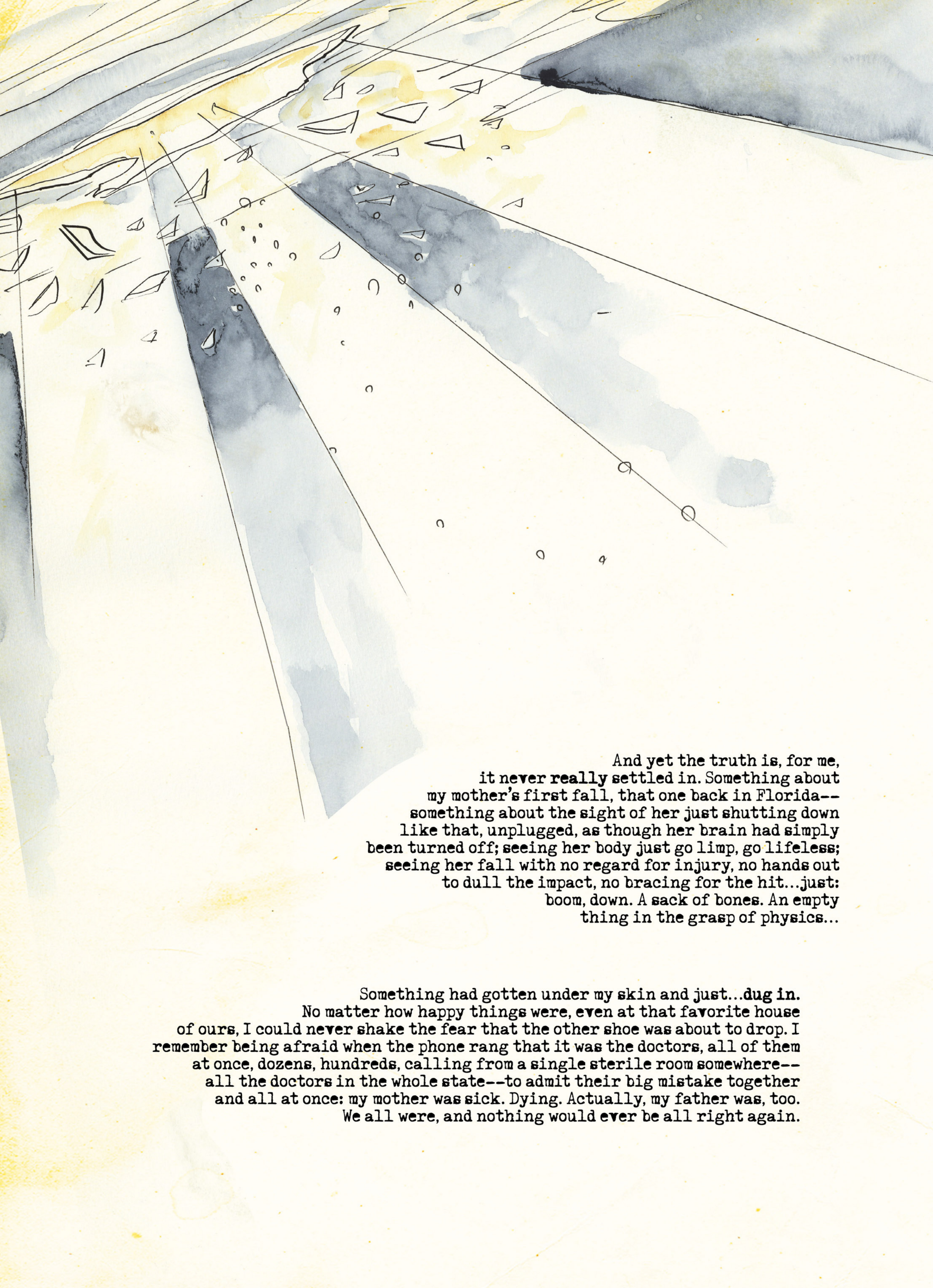




The house had great art, too. The best was a series of big pieces in the dining room. They looked like paintings, but were made with a kind of layered resin epoxy and depicted different aerial views of what looked like a hilly, ancient desert landscape. Golden sands cut through with white, winding rivers. There were three in the series, which was called "The land of milk and honey," and the trick to them was that they were actually made with milk and honey and ground-up human bone--bone ground to a sand-like texture...All of these things mixed and sculpted into something that should have been grim, but was instead shimmering beautiful. My mother and I visited that house at least once a month. Here we were always inventors--genius inventors! A mother-and-son team that had recently forged a new super-elastic material made from transitory, radioactive elements at the farthest, hidden end of the periodic table. Or the team that had just designed a new kind of computerized houseplant that would produce any bloom you requested. Sometimes my father joined us, too--he'd drive out after he was done and meet us at this house and we'd sit as a family in a home that wasn't ours and pretend to be the same people but different, people about to start.

We were safe and happy and this went on for years. Years.



An abstract watercolor and ink drawing occupies the upper half of the page. It features broad, diagonal strokes of blue and grey, with smaller, more defined shapes in yellow and white. Thin black lines crisscross the composition, some intersecting with the colored areas. Small, dark, irregular shapes are scattered throughout, particularly in the upper left and center. The overall effect is one of movement and layered textures.

And yet the truth is, for me,
it never really settled in. Something about
my mother's first fall, that one back in Florida--
something about the sight of her just shutting down
like that, unplugged, as though her brain had simply
been turned off; seeing her body just go limp, go lifeless;
seeing her fall with no regard for injury, no hands out
to dull the impact, no bracing for the hit...just:
boom, down. A sack of bones. An empty
thing in the grasp of physics...

Something had gotten under my skin and just...dug in.
No matter how happy things were, even at that favorite house
of ours, I could never shake the fear that the other shoe was about to drop. I
remember being afraid when the phone rang that it was the doctors, all of them
at once, dozens, hundreds, calling from a single sterile room somewhere--
all the doctors in the whole state--to admit their big mistake together
and all at once: my mother was sick. Dying. Actually, my father was, too.
We all were, and nothing would ever be all right again.

I was happy, but always I was afraid that it wouldn't last. The best way I can describe the feeling is like being out on a big frozen lake with the people you know--your friends, your family. You're out there together, and everyone is enjoying the ice, laughing as they teeter and slide about. Kids chase each other. Older folks shuffle forward, arm in arm. And you're enjoying yourself, too--you are! You take a running start and drop to your knees, pinwheeling across the ice, and it's thrilling and hilarious, but who cares, because there's some part of you, some deep part, that cannot stop thinking about the freezing water beneath the ice. Stop it, you say to yourself.

STOP IT.

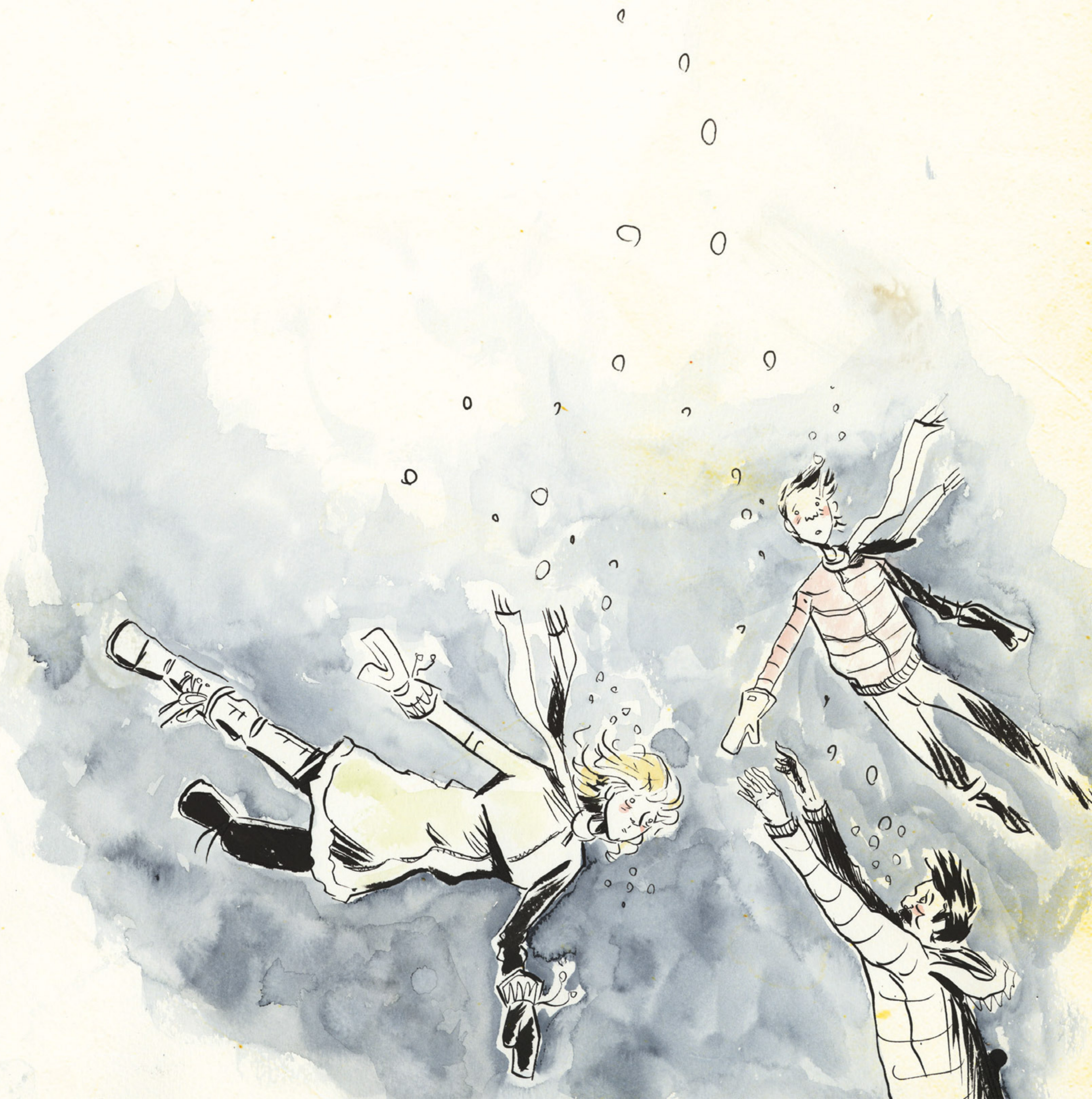
But you can't stop it. Because some part of you refuses to ignore what's beneath, to ignore the fact that at some point--maybe in seconds, maybe in weeks, maybe years, if it stays cold and you're lucky--but sometime in the foreseeable future, the ice will give way to the cold, black water below it. And, one by one, your friends, your family, and you, will all fall in.

Shut up, you think, as you spin across the ice, laughing.

SHUT UP.

There's your father, rushing toward you, about to drop to his belly and slide at you like a goofball. You're laughing and he's laughing, and here he comes, and it's--

But the water is there below you.





Will it ever go away, you wonder?
Or will it always be there, that shadow at the edge of
things? But, even at a young age, you know the answer to
that question, don't you? You know it: of course not.
Because it's just there, so close to the surface.

It's there at school, in the sickening way
the cellophane peels off your sandwich.

Or there, in a shattered vein on your teacher's calf.

Or there, in the scuffed nose of your action figure.

And there, in the weakening grip of the magnets on the
board. In the erasures on your homework. In pens running
out. In new sneakers that squeak so loudly, but go silent by
end of day. In the small tear in the backseat of the bus, the
wisp of stuffing you can't push back in all the way. In the
parade of blinking turn signals on the cars lined up at
the red light by your house, on and off, on and off, ticking
in some pattern that means nothing at all. And as the day
ends, you feel it deepening, that shadow, becoming material.
The blackness pooling below your nightlight. The deepest
dark of that hallway that separates your room from your
parents'.

All of it speaks to that same fucking water beneath the
crust of things, moving and shifting and waiting, and you
wonder, DOES ANYONE ELSE FEEL LIKE THIS?!

Are you alone?

Are you just messed up? Were you born missing something,
some protective layer, some membrane that's supposed to
shield you from the sight of it--that water, right here,
inches below.

By that year--by twelve years old--the fears had become more pronounced. It was a time of change for me and for my family. My body was certainly changing, becoming more and more foreign to me. Strange whorls of hair were growing under my arms and at my crotch, but not really, not fully; it was more like I was becoming someone's clumsy sketch of an adult. And my family was changing, too. My mother was pregnant. I was going to have a brother. My parents were elated. And I was happy about this, too, but more and more, my need to record life as it was right then--before anything changed--was unstoppable.

It was a Tuesday I made my play for the Quad. I'd scoped the B and D too many times at this point. Something had to happen. So I went for it. I had my puffy winter coat folded in my arms, and my plan was to lay it on top of a Quad box, act like I'd done this to tie my shoe, then stand up, take my coat, and inadvertently scoop up the Quad beneath it. The hitch in my plan occurred when I was just about to make my move and an old woman I didn't know stopped me. "Your shoe is untied," she told me. And so I had to tie my shoe, the shoe I'd left untied in order to snap up the Quad. The whole incident had me terrified, though. I was sure someone was onto me. Some employee behind a one-way mirror in some backroom. Still, it was too late to turn back now. I had to try. So I went for it, and less than two minutes later, I was biking home, furiously, joyously, with the stolen Quad under my arm.





That night I pushed record and hid the device under the dining room table. Right away, a wave of relief rose in me, rose all around me, in fact. I felt insured. Whatever happened, I'd be able to revisit this moment. But the strangest thing was that the act of recording the moment made my fears feel ridiculous. Lying in bed later that night, the Quad hidden in my closet, I felt like an idiot for being so worried.

Things had been good a long time, and we were on the cusp of more good things.

A week later, my mother fell again.

This time, within days, she was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a fatal connective-tissue disorder that inhibits your body from making enough collagen. Basically, it stops your body from making the connective tissue to hold itself together. Without this tissue, your joints weaken, your bones dislocate--you fall apart inside the sack of your own skin.

Over the next six months, she lost control of one part of her body after another. A breaking down, unlocking. By six months into her pregnancy, she could barely move. Still, her prognosis was fair. Doctors thought she'd recover after the baby was born, at least partially. They hoped her condition would be manageable with medication and treatment.

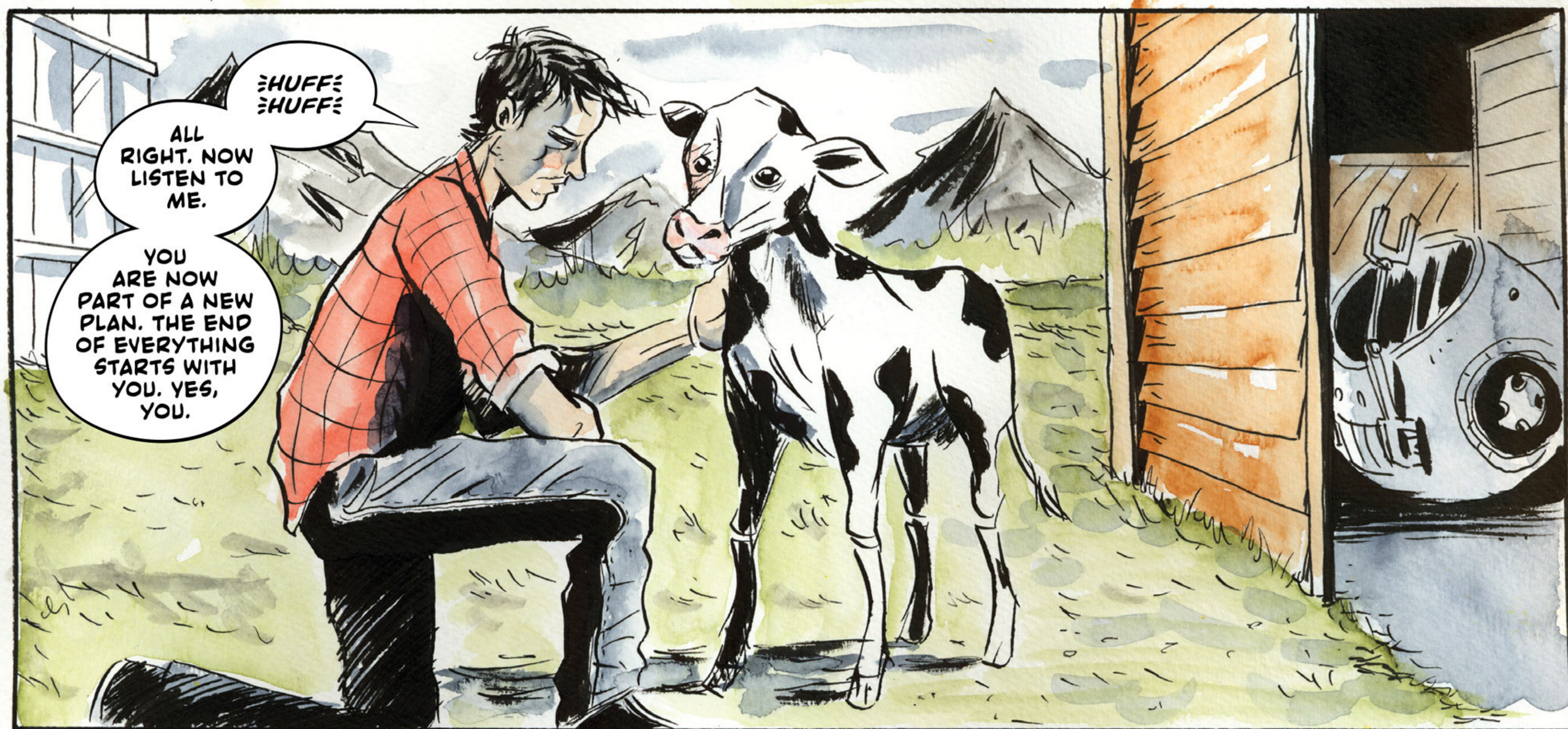
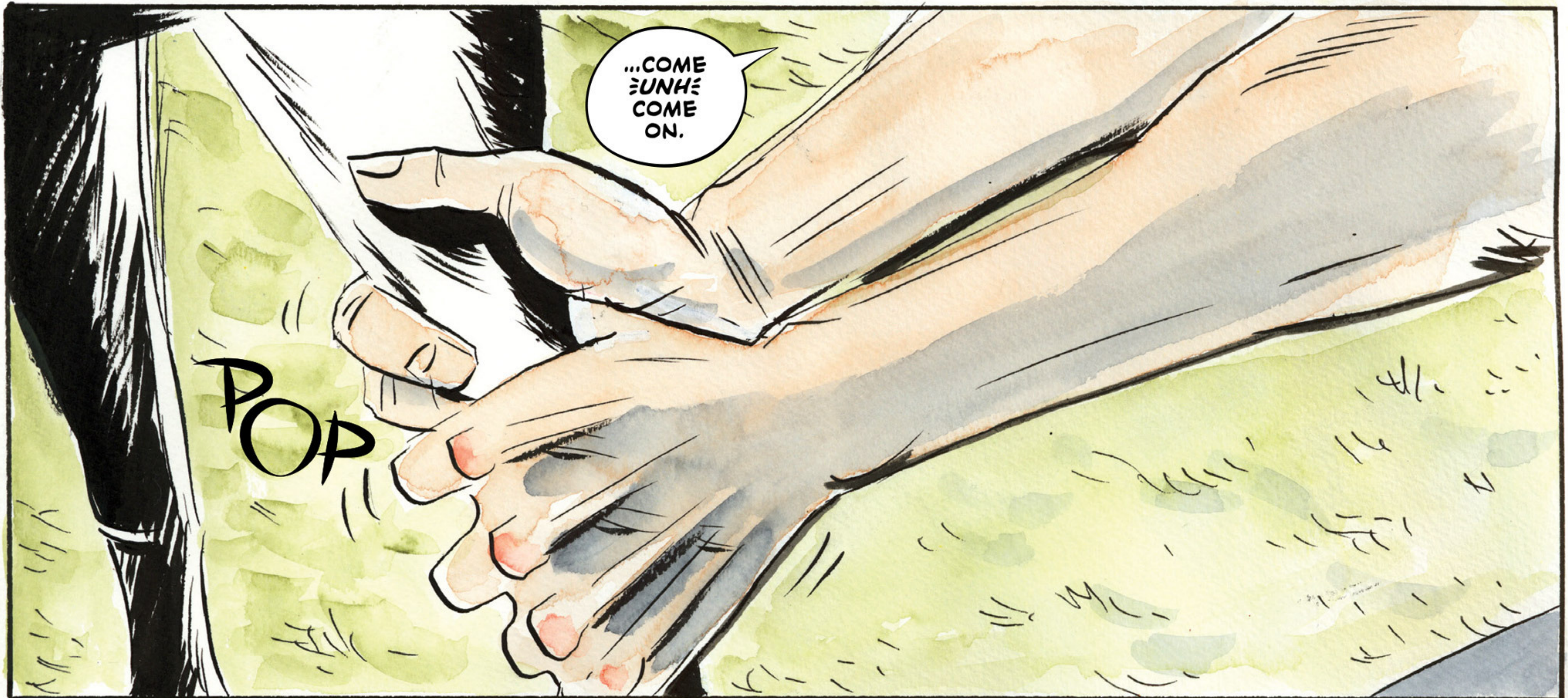
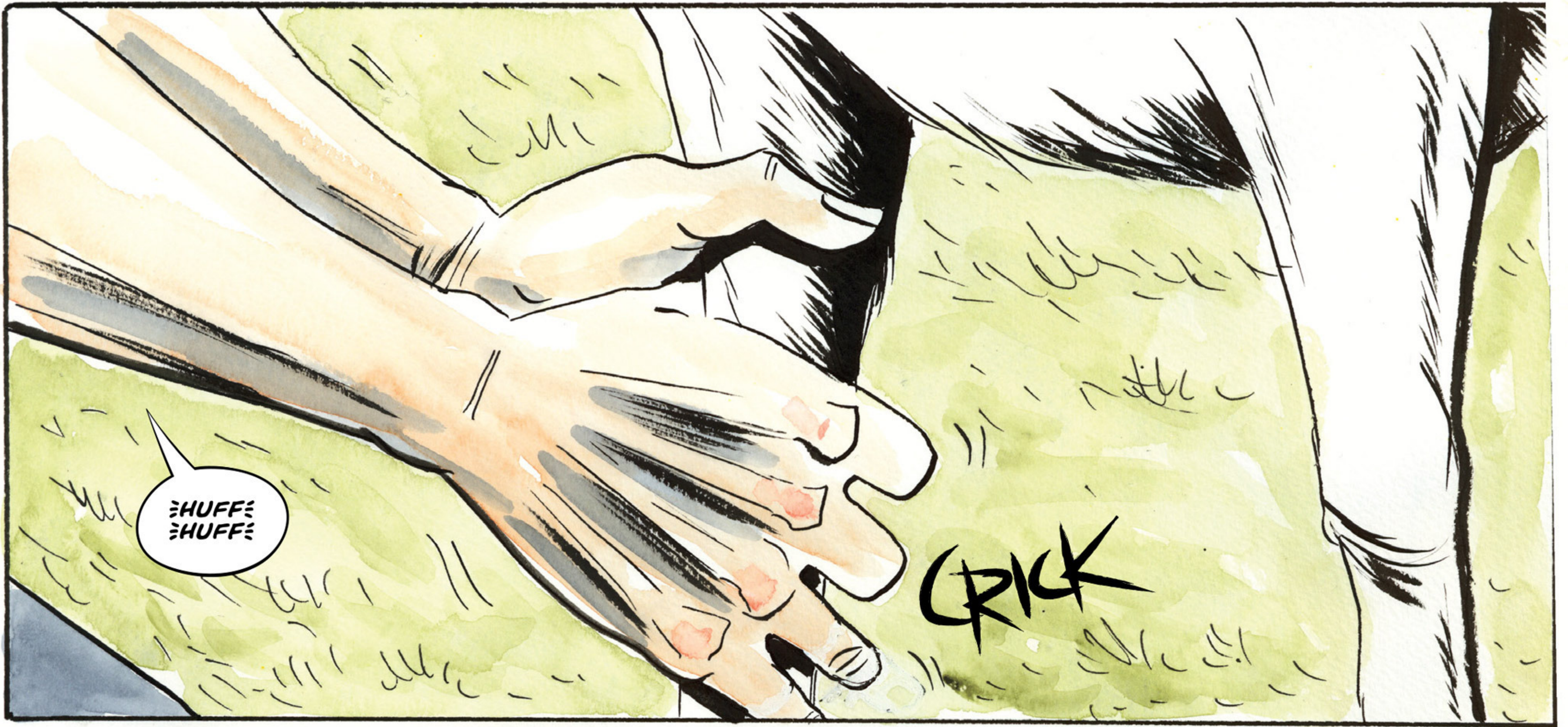
Sometimes, even now, hundreds of years later, literally hundreds, I listen to the tapes from that week--the week in between my theft of the Quad and my mother's big fall. They're mostly just static, the scraping of a chair or the thud of a foot, but now and then I can hear my father laugh. Hear the lilt of my mother's voice as she says something sweet to me. I can just make out the noises.

My parents saw her struggle as a race against time, a fight for the survival of their unborn child. And, much as I tried not to, I often thought of my baby brother growing inside her. A little person trapped inside a collapsing thing, no way out. She fought until the end; even when her mind was failing, she fought. But in the end, she died a month before the baby was due, and, of course, he died with her.



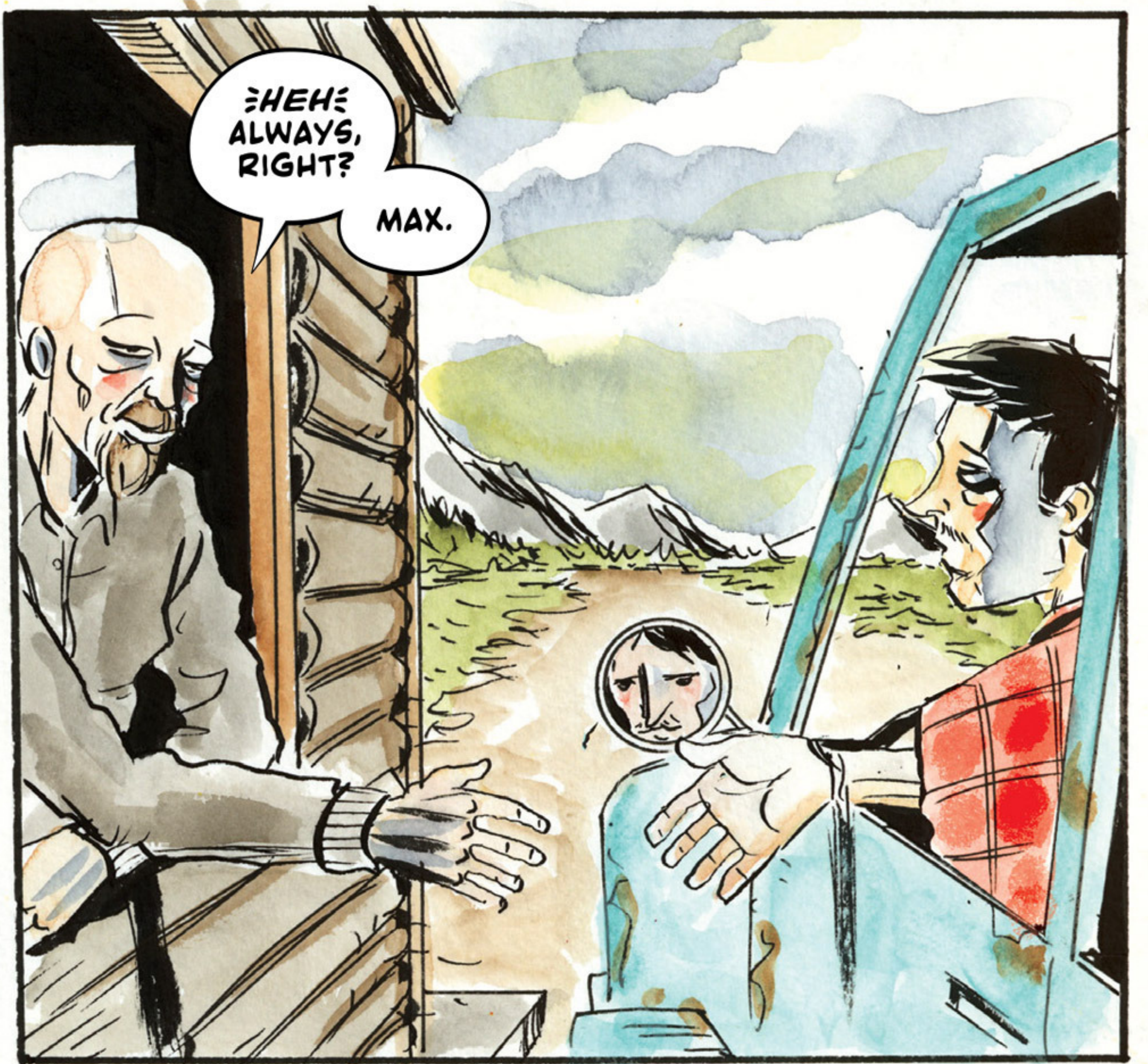
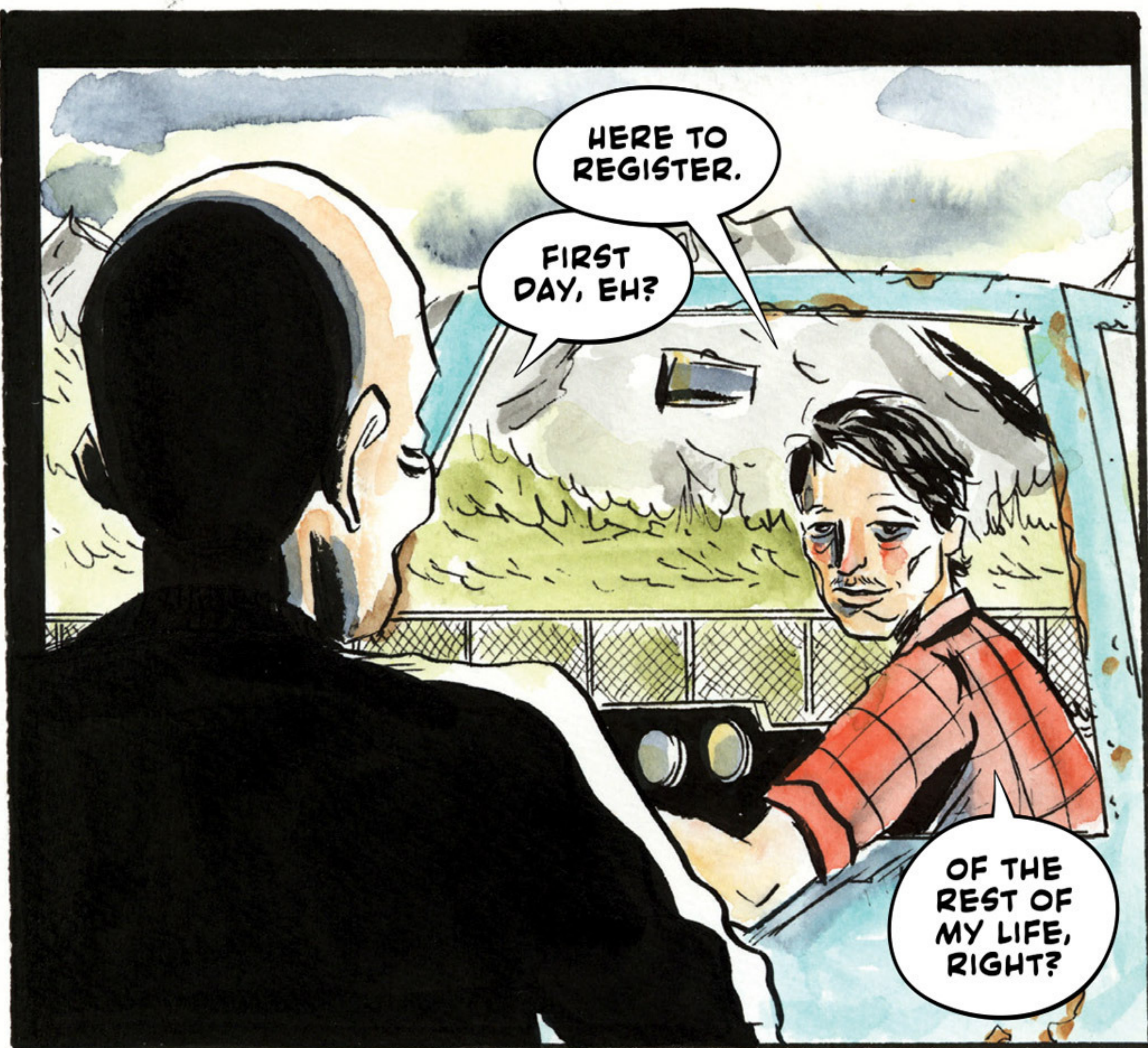
But the goat...the one that escaped us, you and me, here in the jungle. It's looking at us from the other side of the gray patch on the ground, which has grown bigger yet. Carefully, we make our way around the patch and get the goat--I get him and shake his tether, pull his ear. We get him out of there, take him back to the village. But somewhere, deep down, we both know, you and I, that it is too late for the goat. That there is no taking him out of this place--that this place has trapped him somehow, and he will die as it dies. Less than a day later, he's screaming as his rotten hooves split open and fall away, revealing only horror underneath.











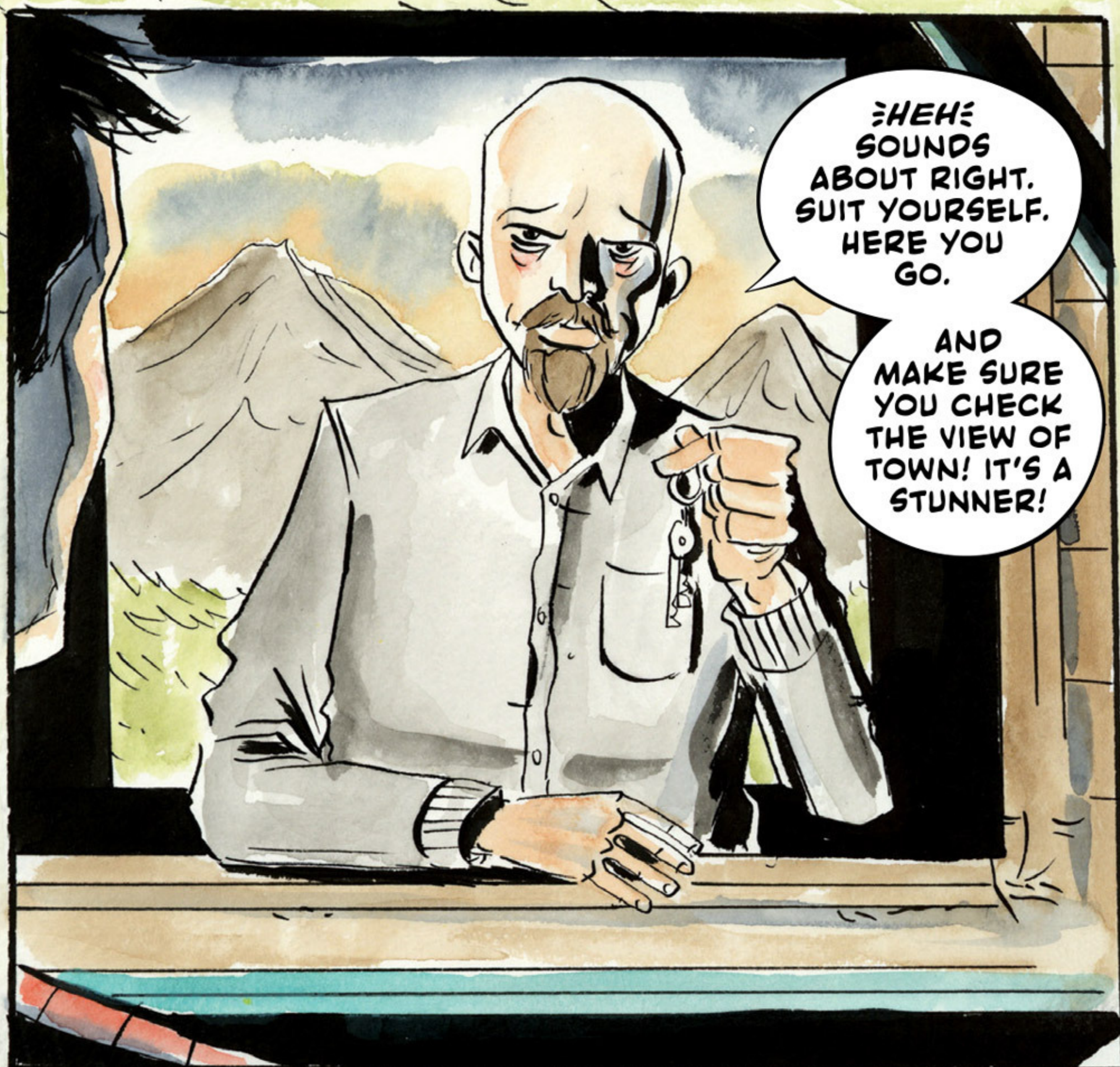
"MAYBE I
WILL TAKE IT,
THANKS."

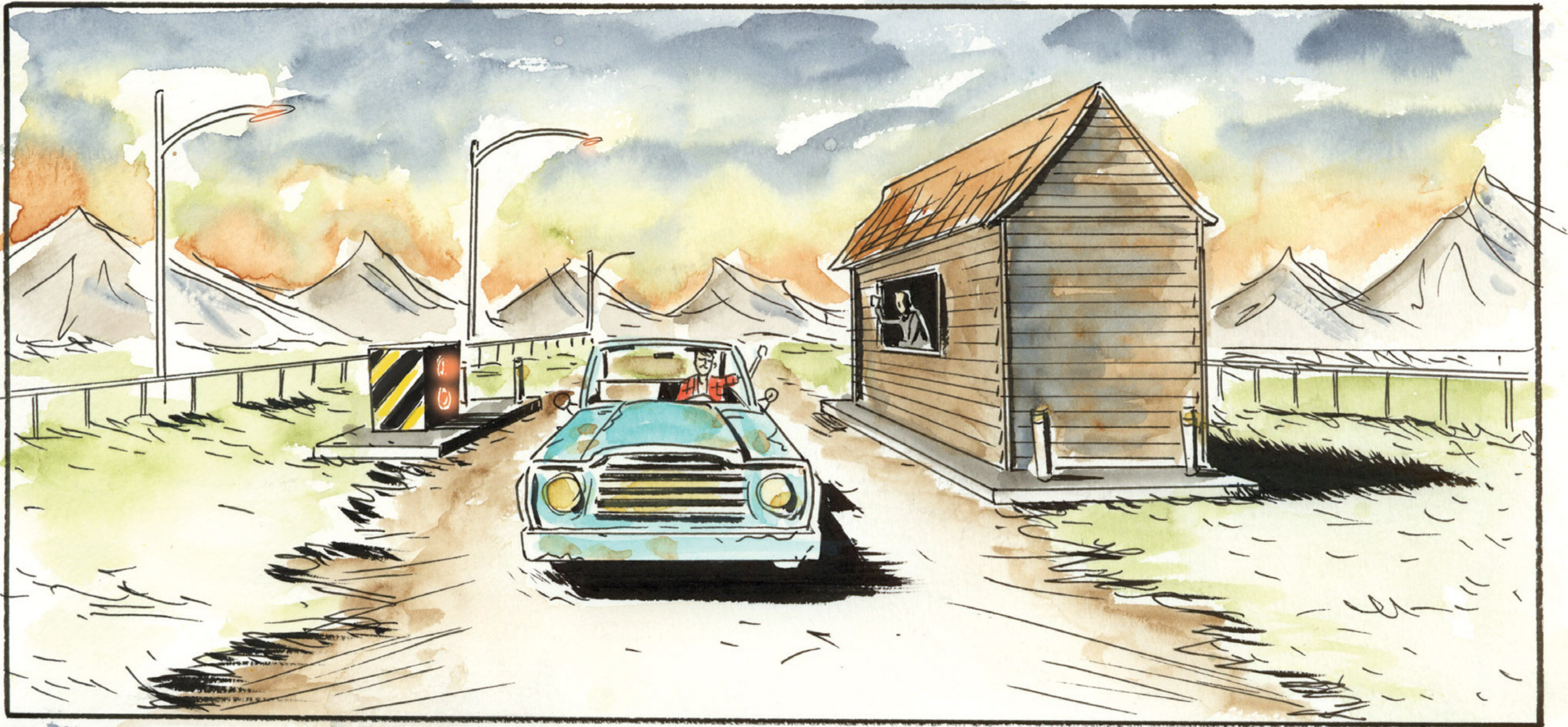
"THERE
YOU GO."

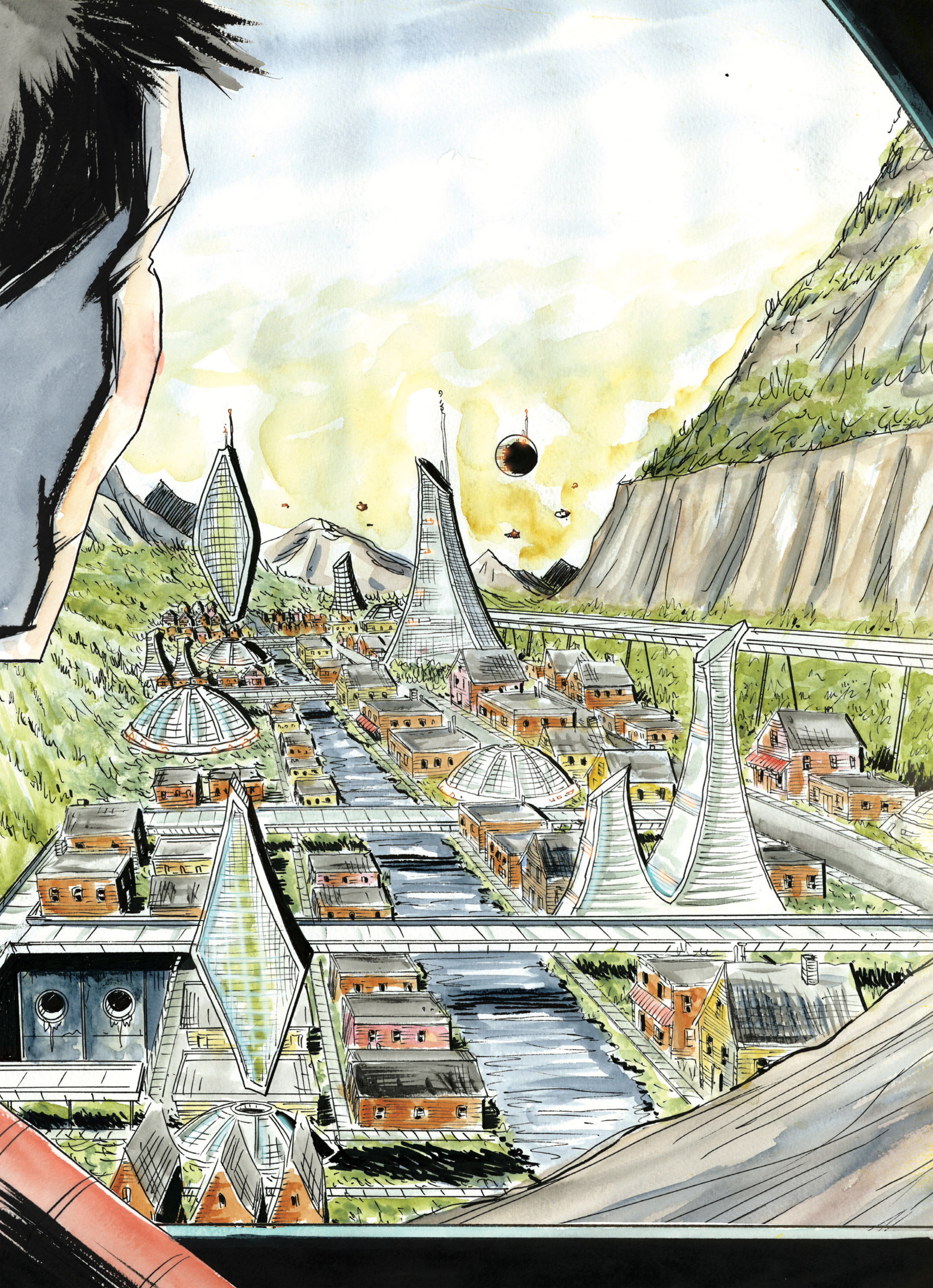
"YOU KNOW, THEY SAY WHEN
THEY FIRST SET THIS PLACE UP,
WHEN WE WERE STILL GETTING
USED TO IT, THEY HAD HEAT
COILS UP IN THE ROCKS,
CIRCLING THE WHOLE PLACE."

"SO LONG AGO I
DON'T REMEMBER,
DO YOU?"

"I KEEP RECORDS. A
JOURNAL FOR MYSELF...I
THINK I WROTE SOMETHING
LIKE, 'IT WAS LIKE LIVING IN
A TOASTER OVEN.'"





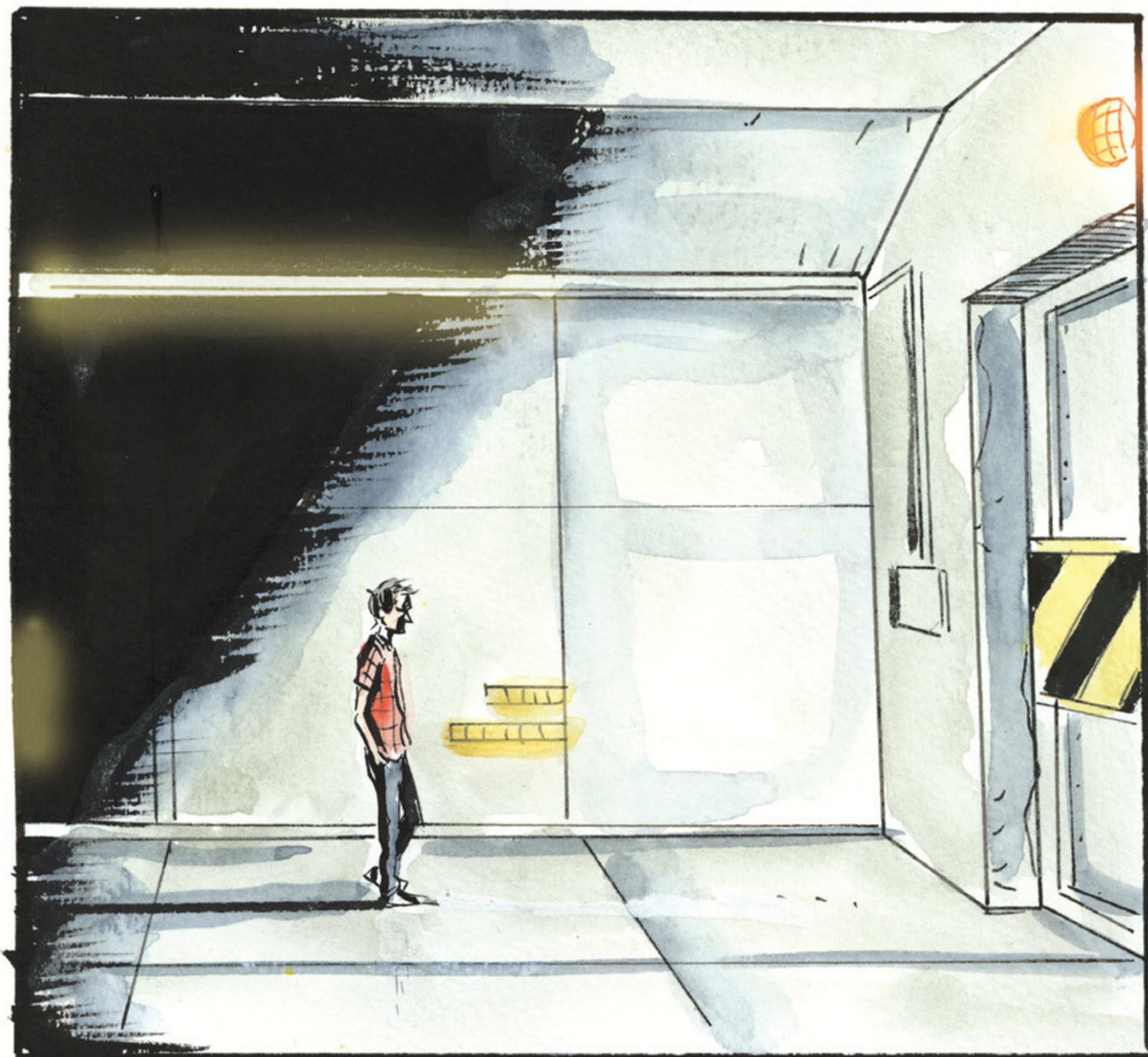
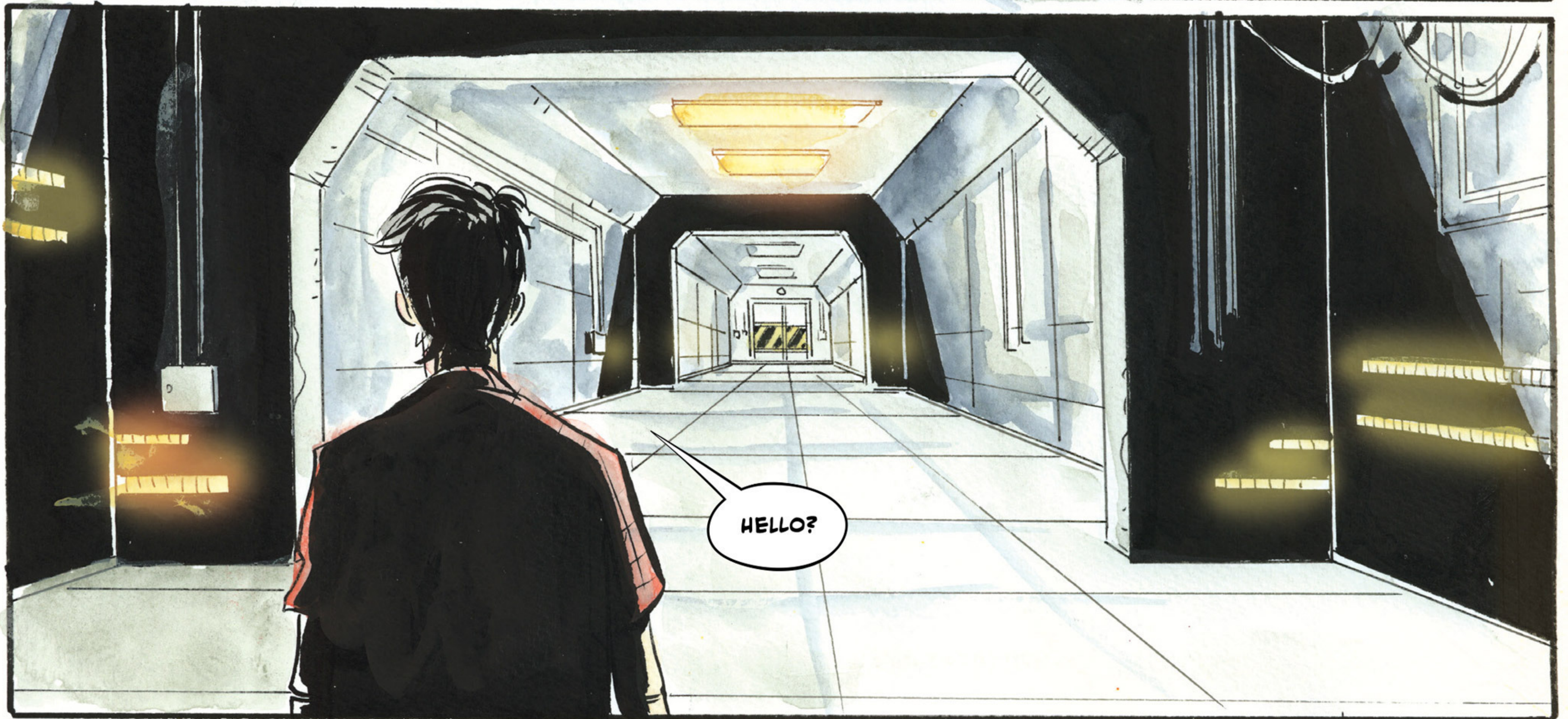


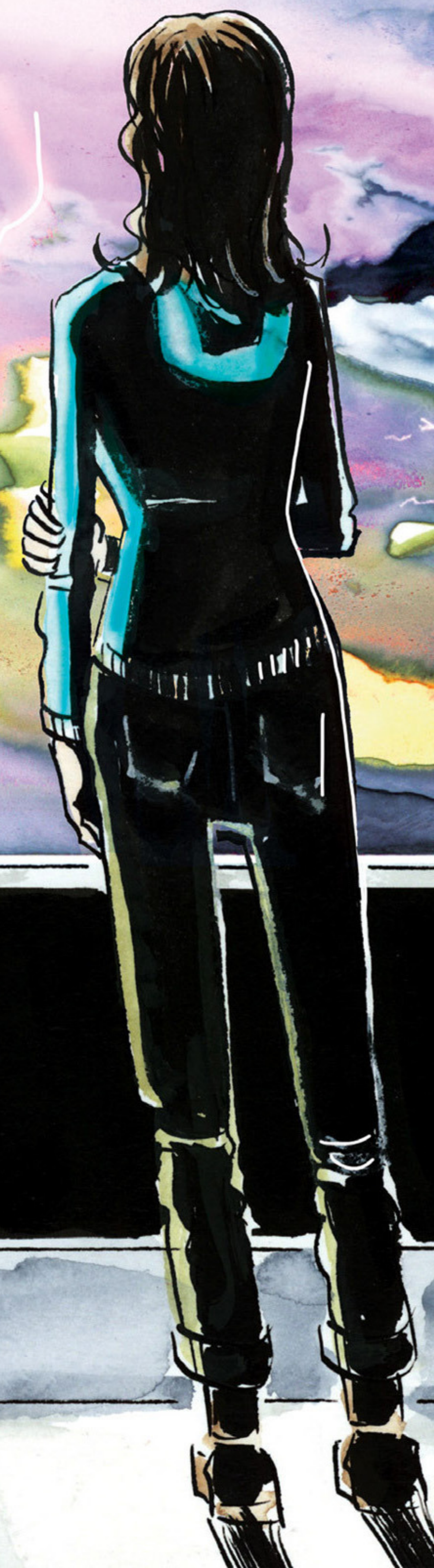
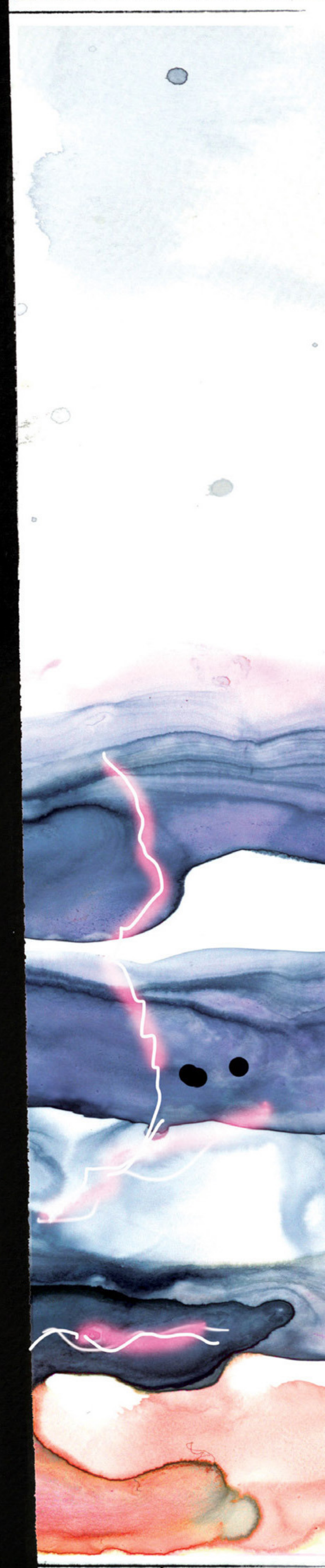
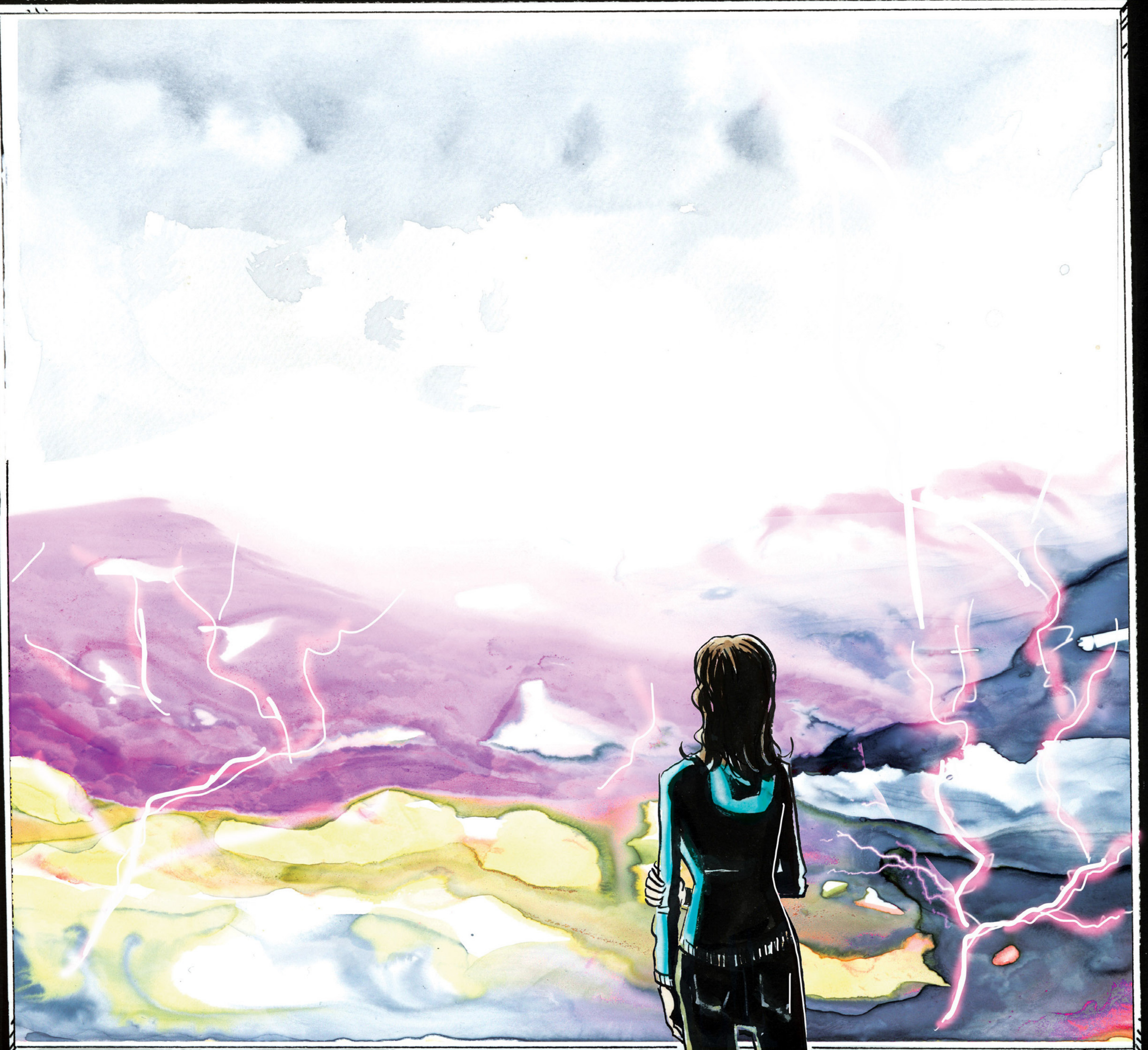


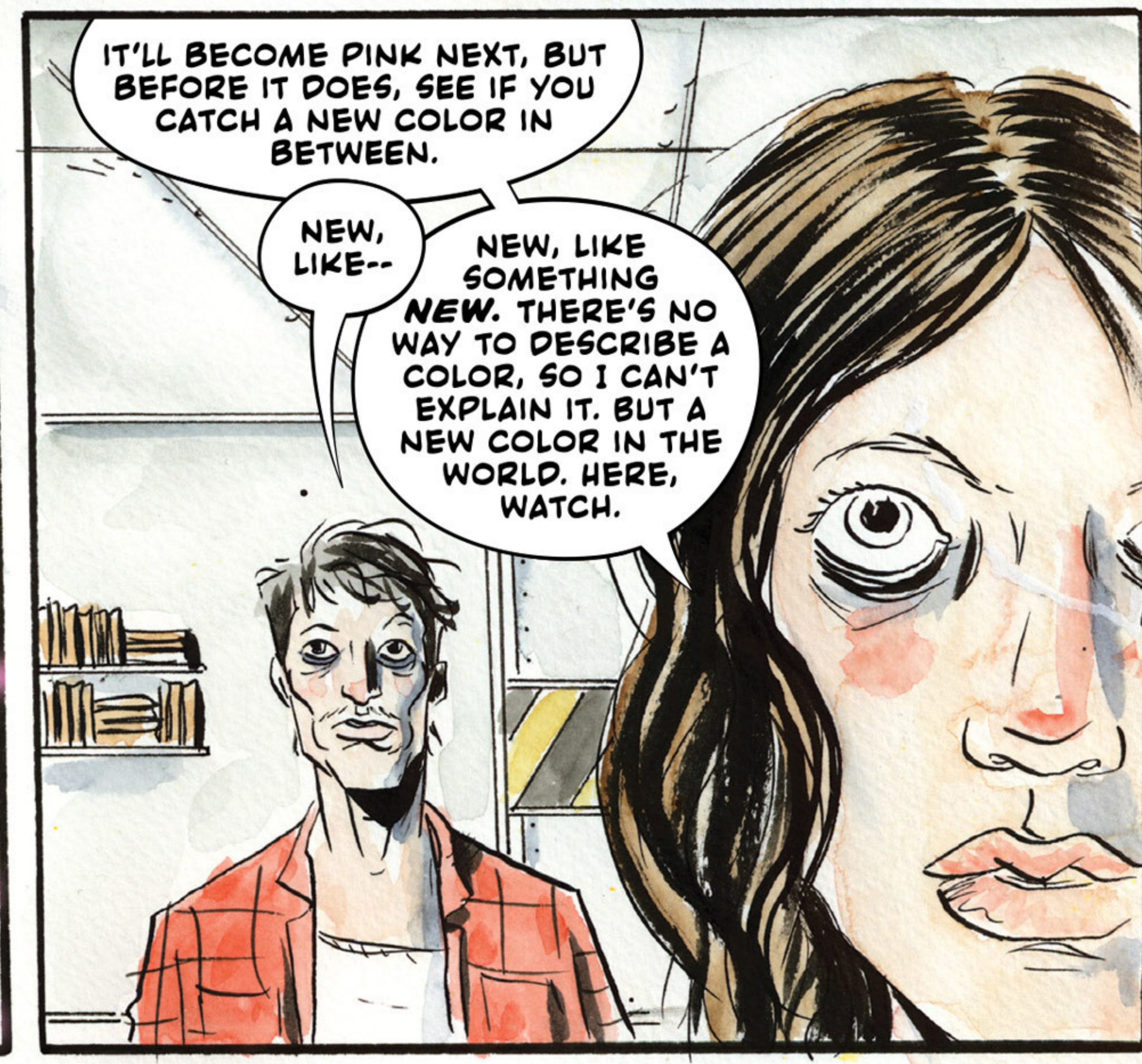
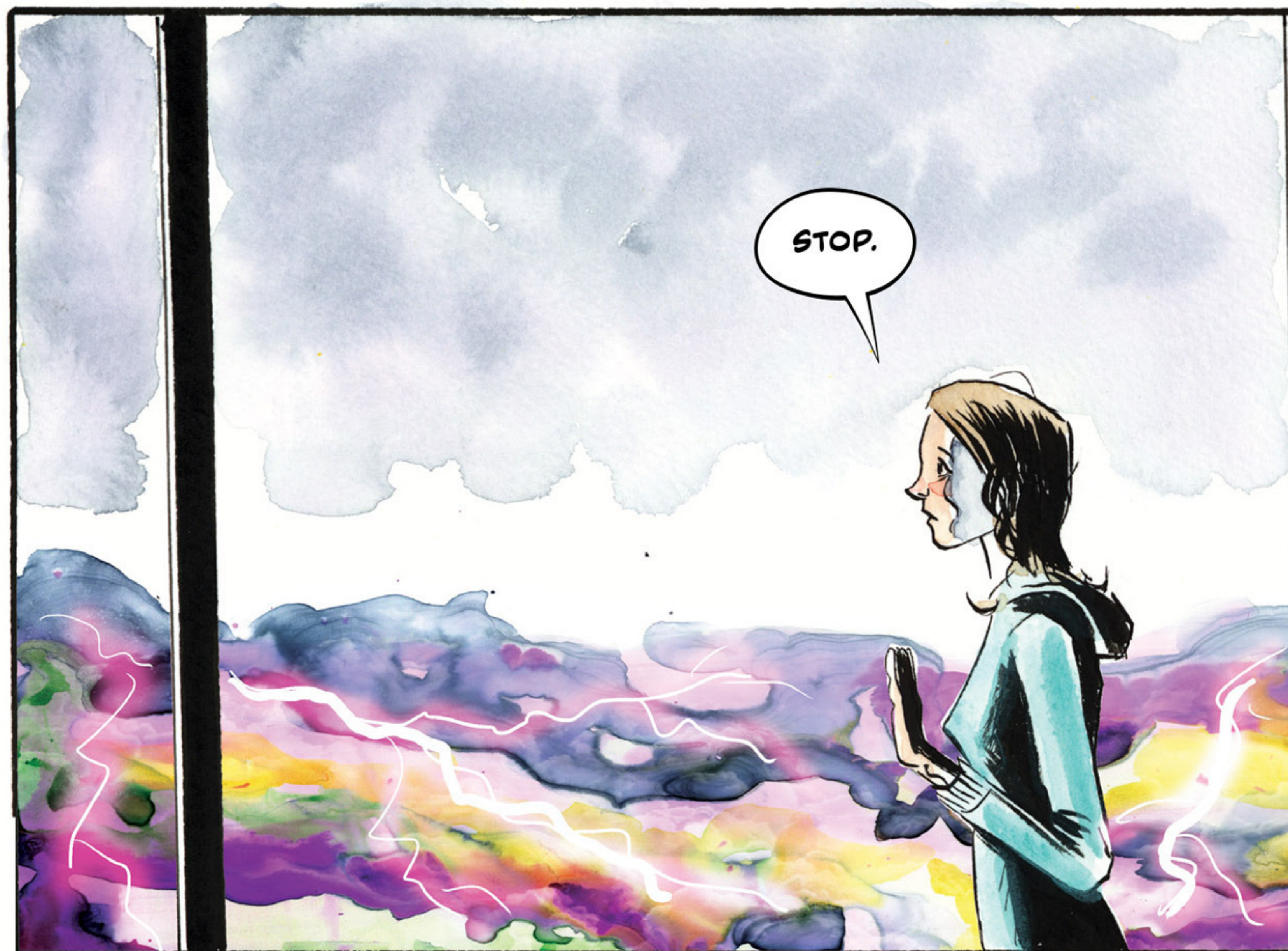


...START
PREPPING THE
STEAK.







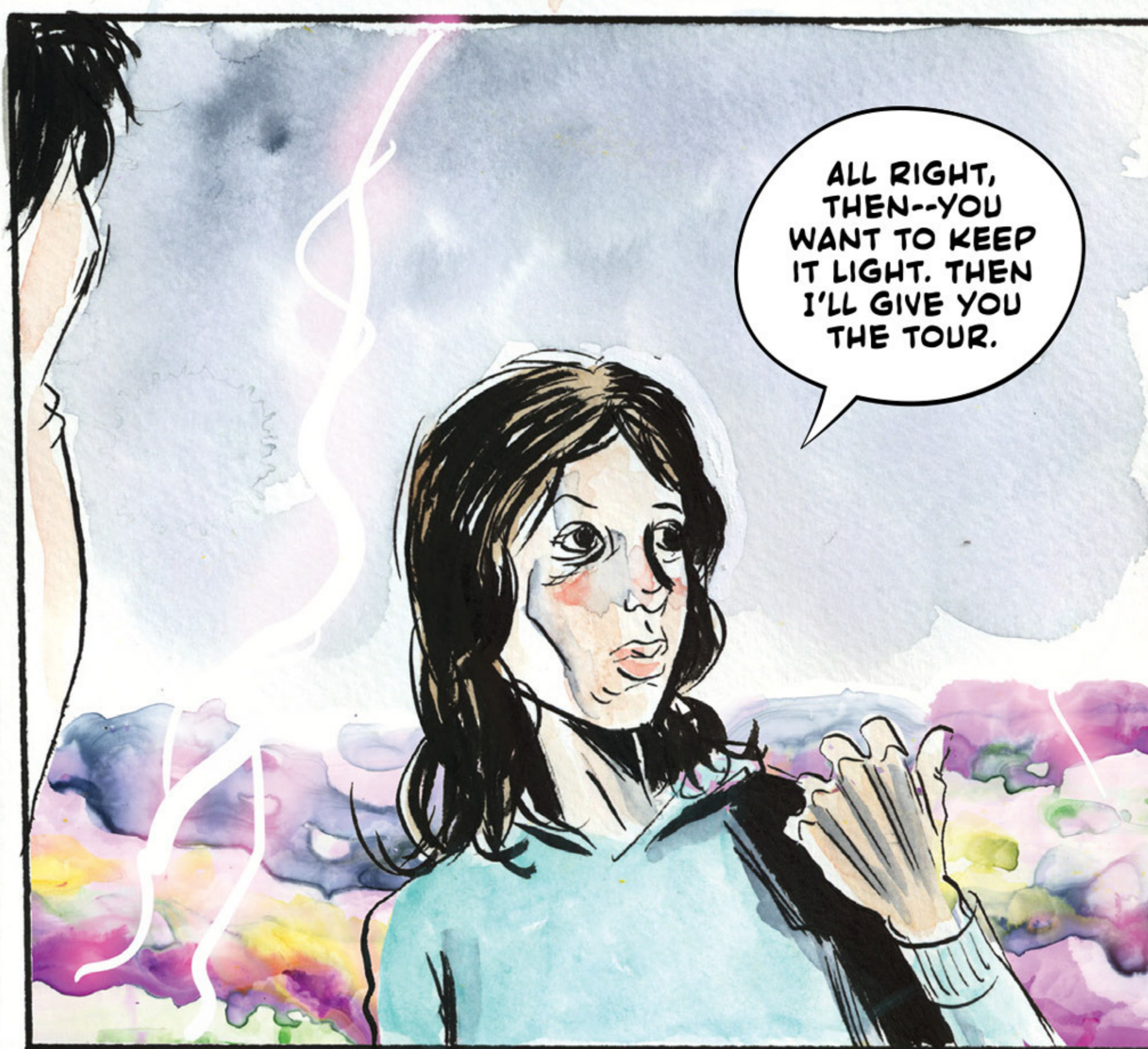
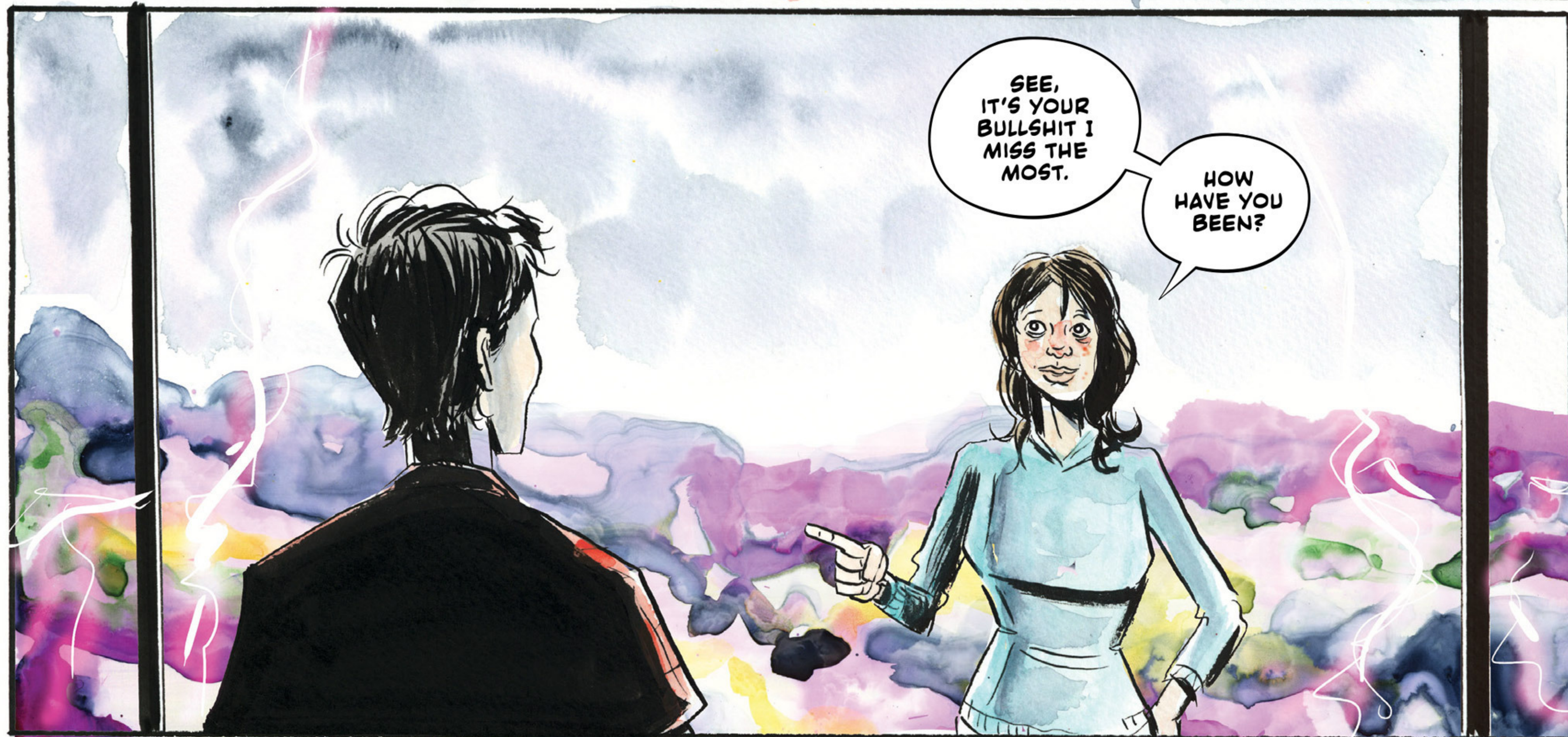


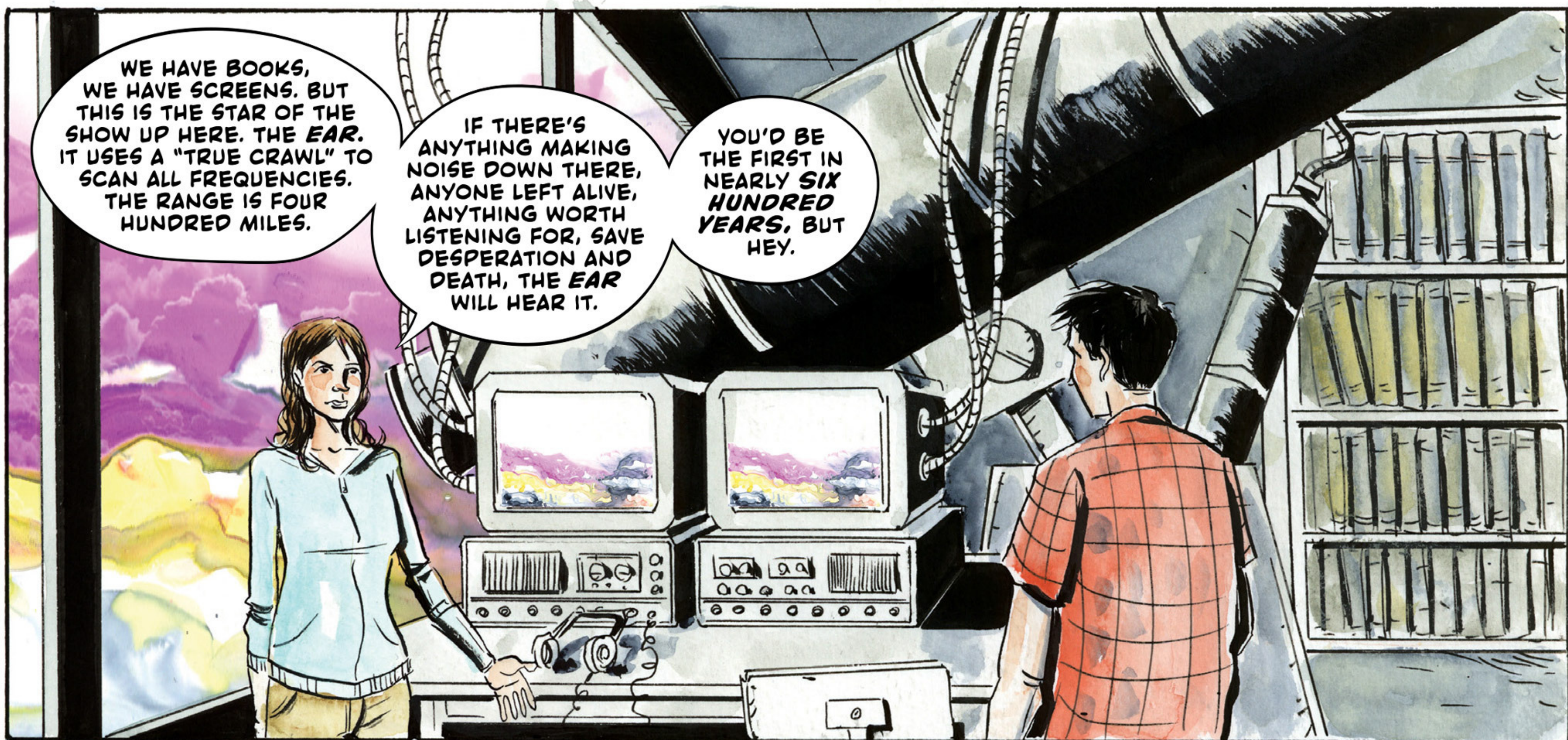
NEW,
LIKE--

NEW, LIKE
SOMETHING
NEW. THERE'S NO
WAY TO DESCRIBE A
COLOR, SO I CAN'T
EXPLAIN IT. BUT A
NEW COLOR IN THE
WORLD. HERE,
WATCH.









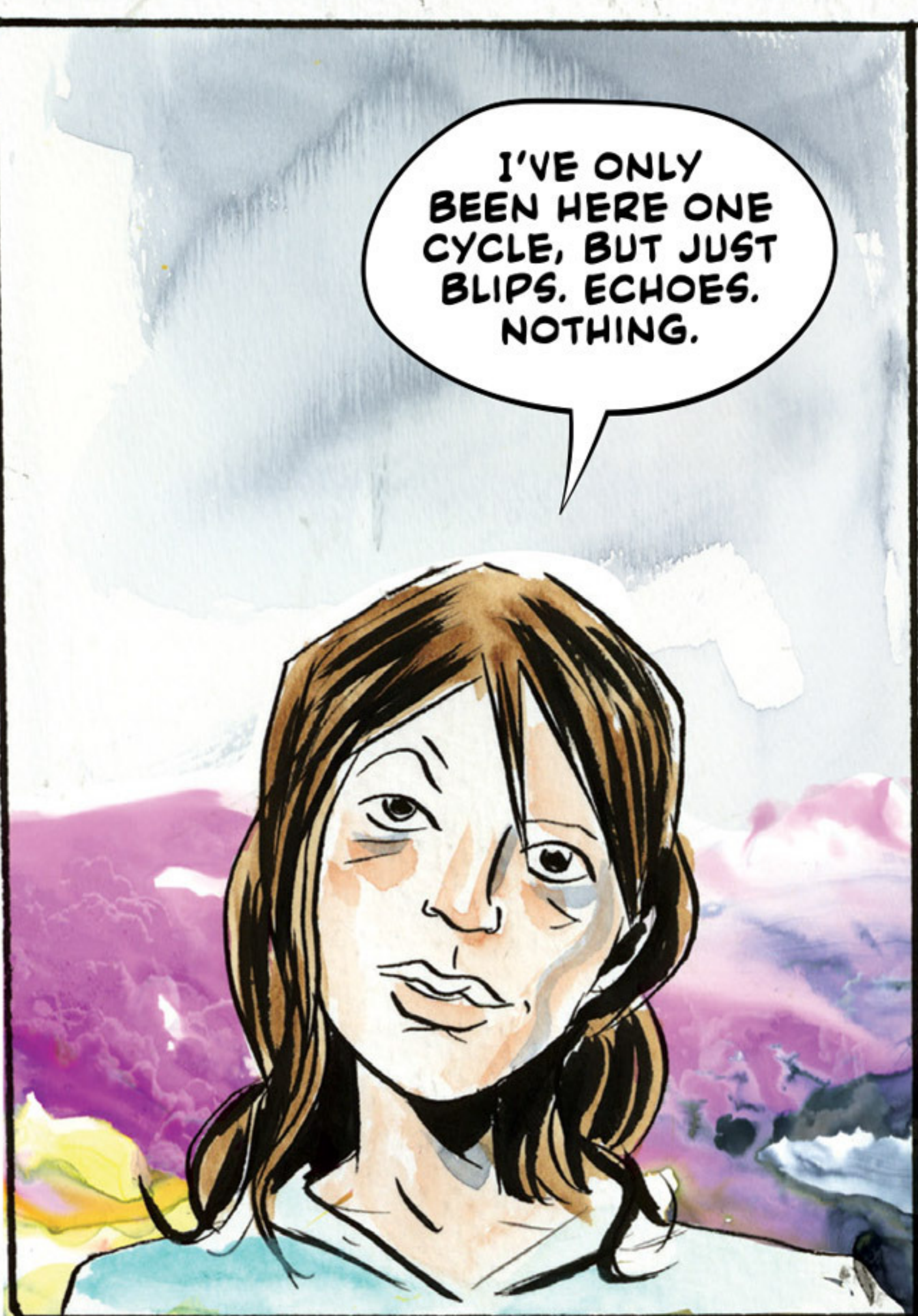
WE HAVE BOOKS,
WE HAVE SCREENS. BUT
THIS IS THE STAR OF THE
SHOW UP HERE. THE *EAR*.
IT USES A "TRUE CRAWL" TO
SCAN ALL FREQUENCIES.
THE RANGE IS FOUR
HUNDRED MILES.

IF THERE'S
ANYTHING MAKING
NOISE DOWN THERE,
ANYONE LEFT ALIVE,
ANYTHING WORTH
LISTENING FOR, SAVE
DESPERATION AND
DEATH, THE *EAR*
WILL HEAR IT.

YOU'D BE
THE FIRST IN
NEARLY **SIX
HUNDRED
YEARS**, BUT
HEY.



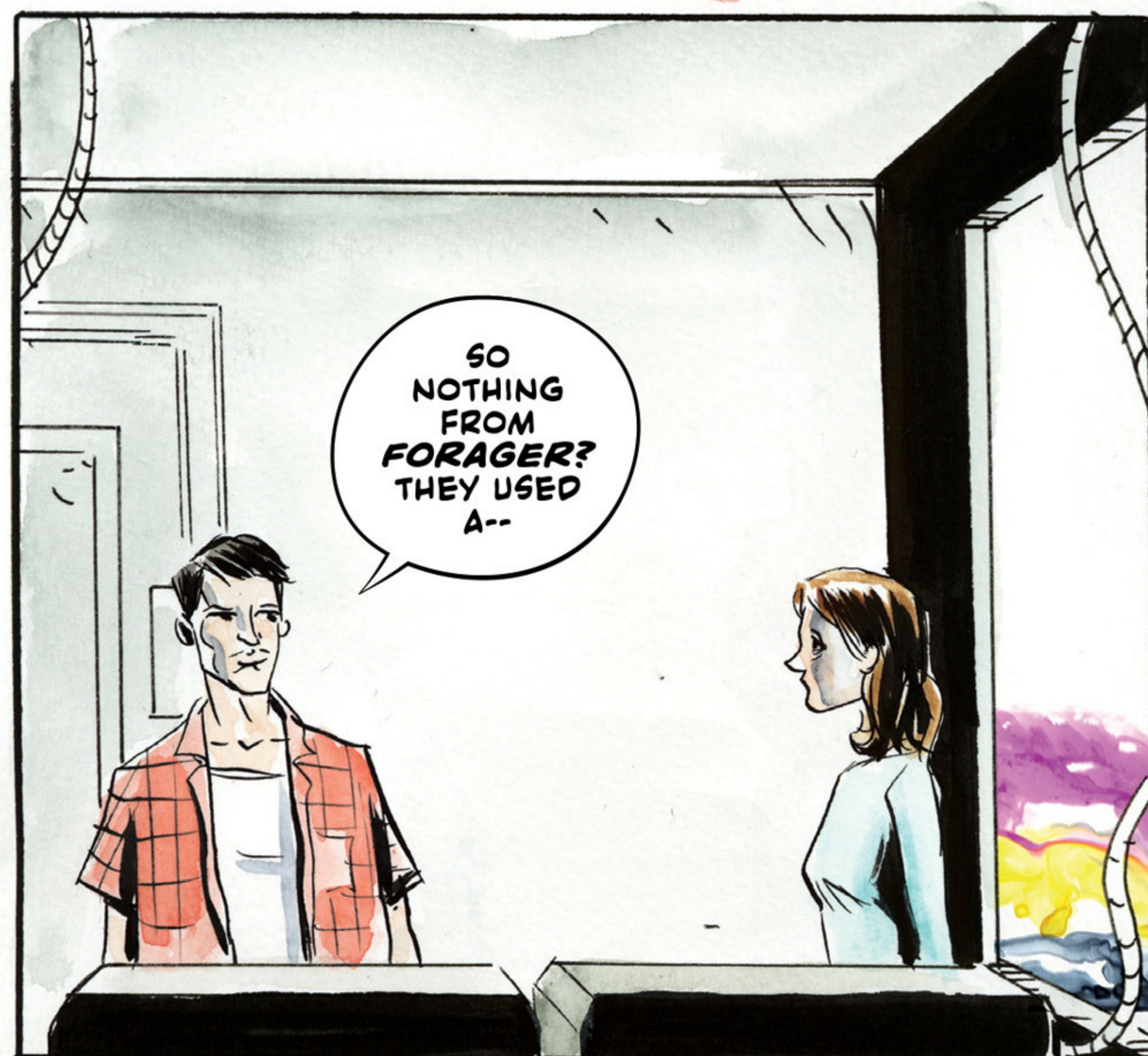
SO YOU
DIDN'T HEAR
ANYTHING?



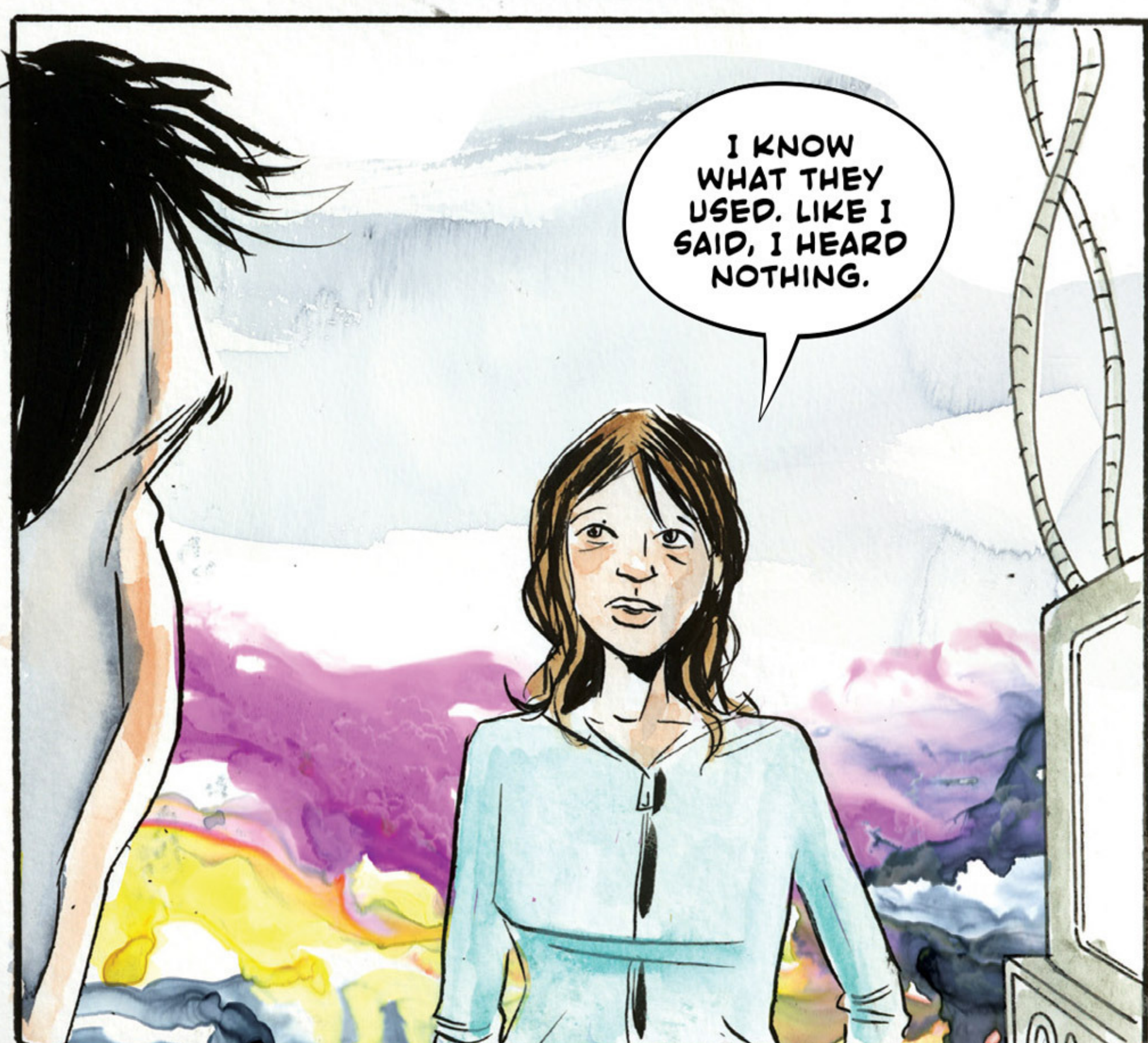
I'VE ONLY
BEEN HERE ONE
CYCLE, BUT JUST
BLIPS. ECHOES.
NOTHING.



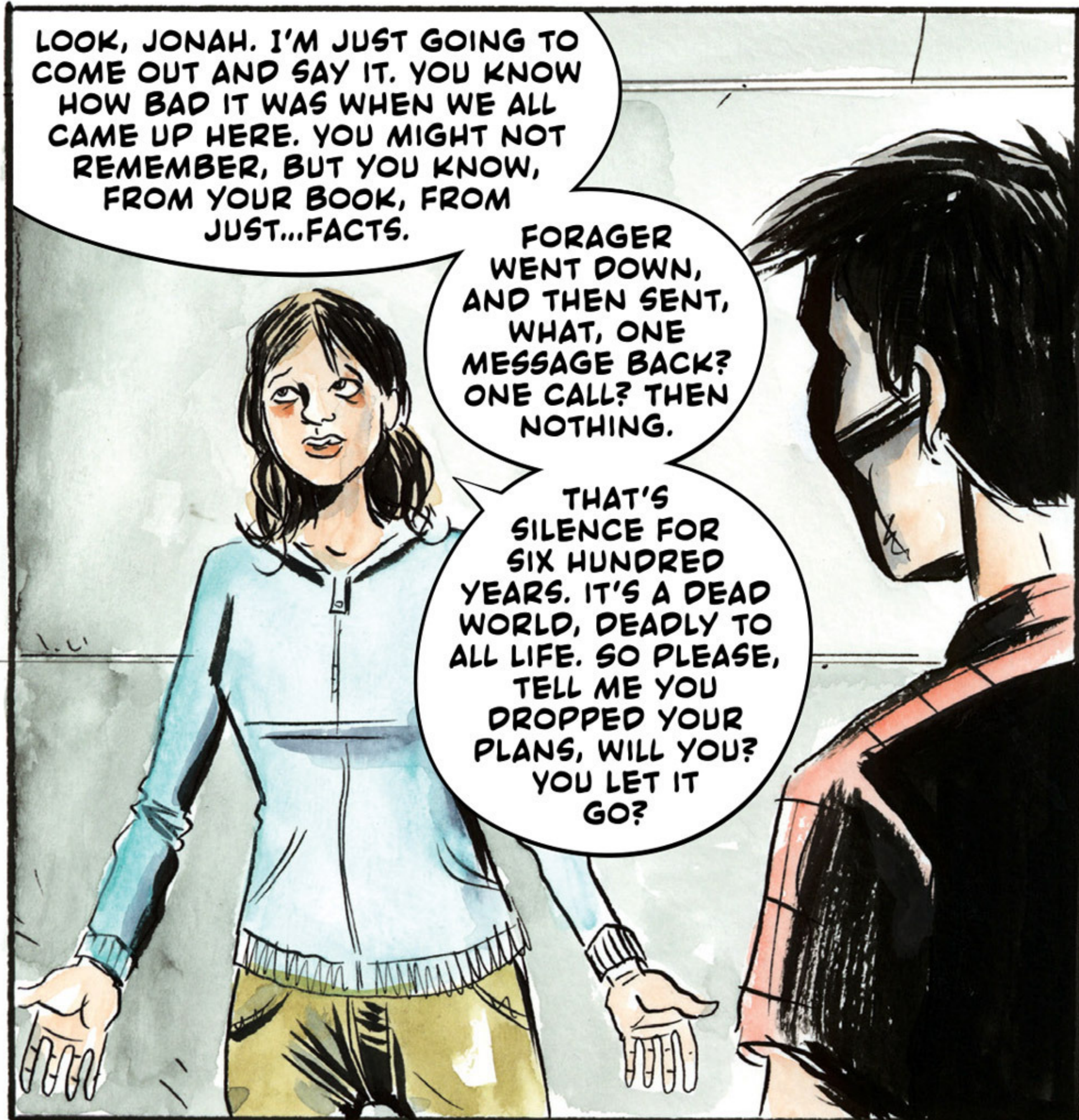
...



SO
NOTHING
FROM
FORAGER?
THEY USED
A--



I KNOW
WHAT THEY
USED. LIKE I
SAID, I HEARD
NOTHING.



LOOK, JONAH. I'M JUST GOING TO COME OUT AND SAY IT. YOU KNOW HOW BAD IT WAS WHEN WE ALL CAME UP HERE. YOU MIGHT NOT REMEMBER, BUT YOU KNOW, FROM YOUR BOOK, FROM JUST...FACTS.

FORAGER WENT DOWN, AND THEN SENT, WHAT, ONE MESSAGE BACK? ONE CALL? THEN NOTHING.

THAT'S SILENCE FOR SIX HUNDRED YEARS. IT'S A DEAD WORLD, DEADLY TO ALL LIFE. SO PLEASE, TELL ME YOU DROPPED YOUR PLANS, WILL YOU? YOU LET IT GO?



YOU'D TELL ME, THOUGH, RIGHT? IF YOU HEARD SOMETHING?



MY GOD. DON'T YOU GET IT? THIS WAS MY GIFT TO YOU, CYCLING THROUGH HERE. I DID IT SO **YOU DON'T HAVE TO**. SO YOU CAN MOVE ON. SO YOU CAN BURN **THAT BOOK** OF YOURS, OR TOSS IT DOWN INTO THE CLOUDS AND START A NEW LIFE.



WE'RE ON THE CUSP OF SOMETHING SPECIAL HERE, COOKE. REALLY. I'M TELLING YOU. SO HOW ABOUT YOU COME DOWN WITH ME? YOU JUST SKIP THIS POST. I CAN PUT IN WITH--

NO. I'M FINE. REALLY.

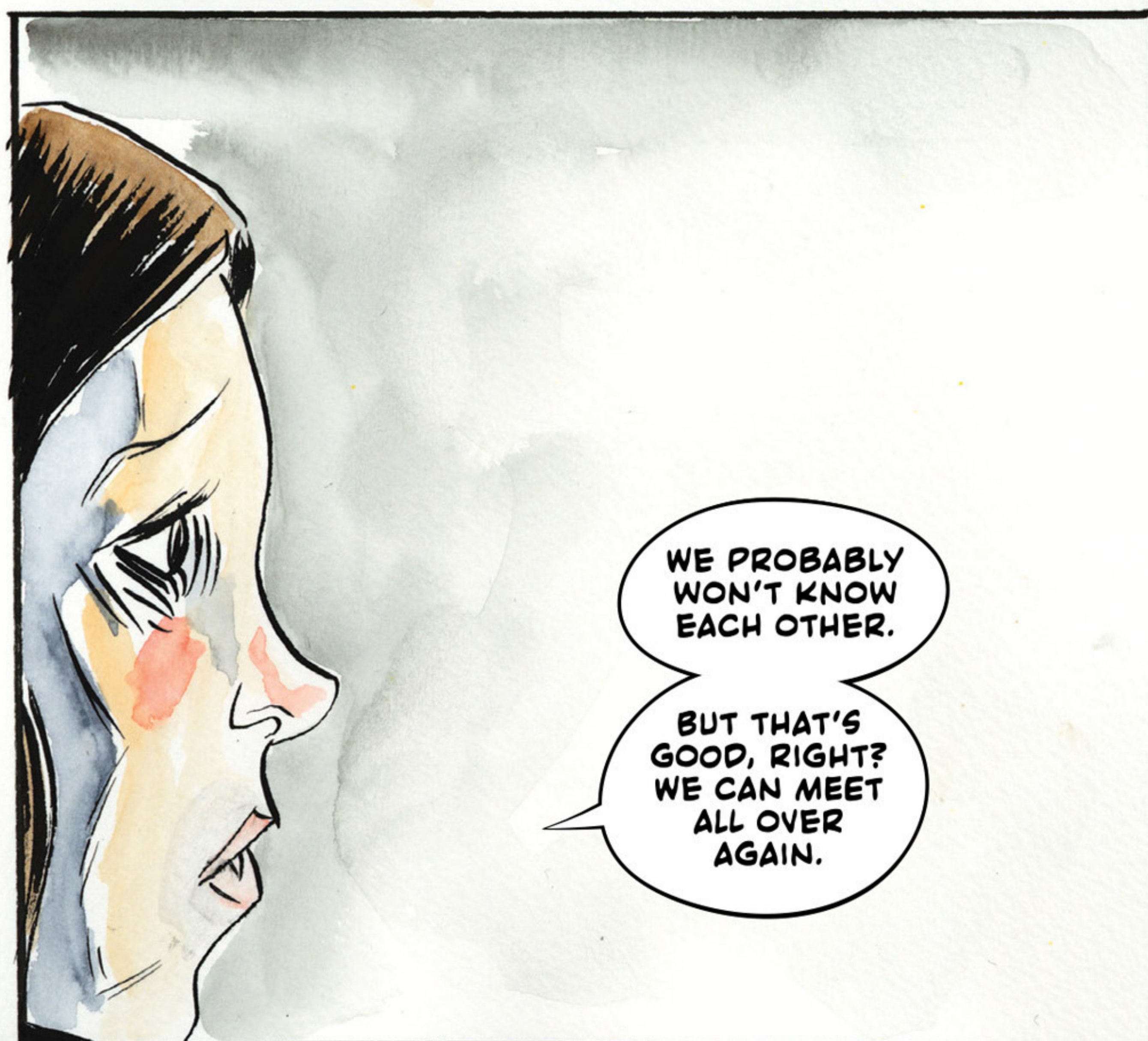


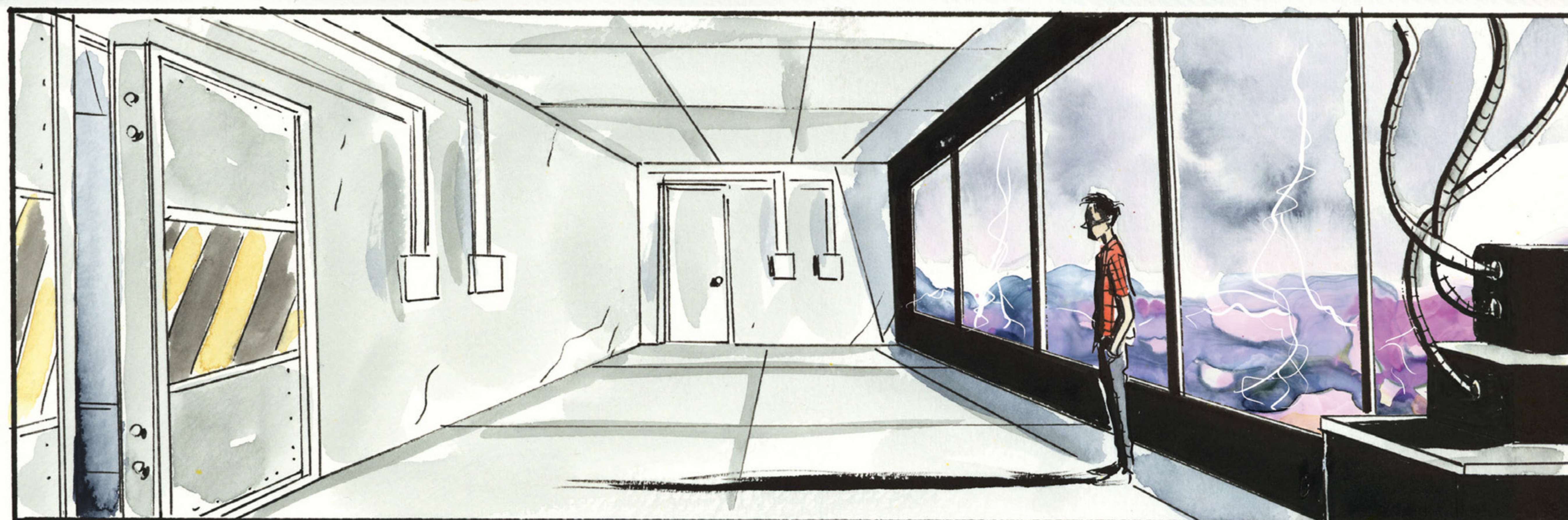
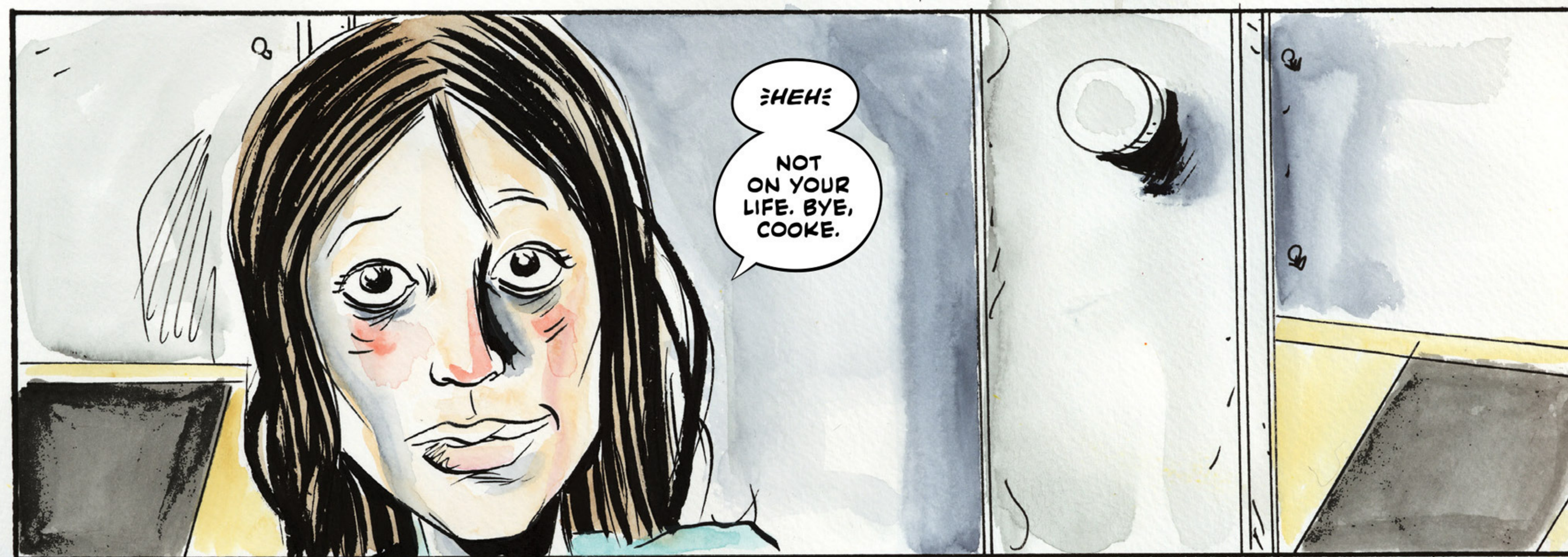
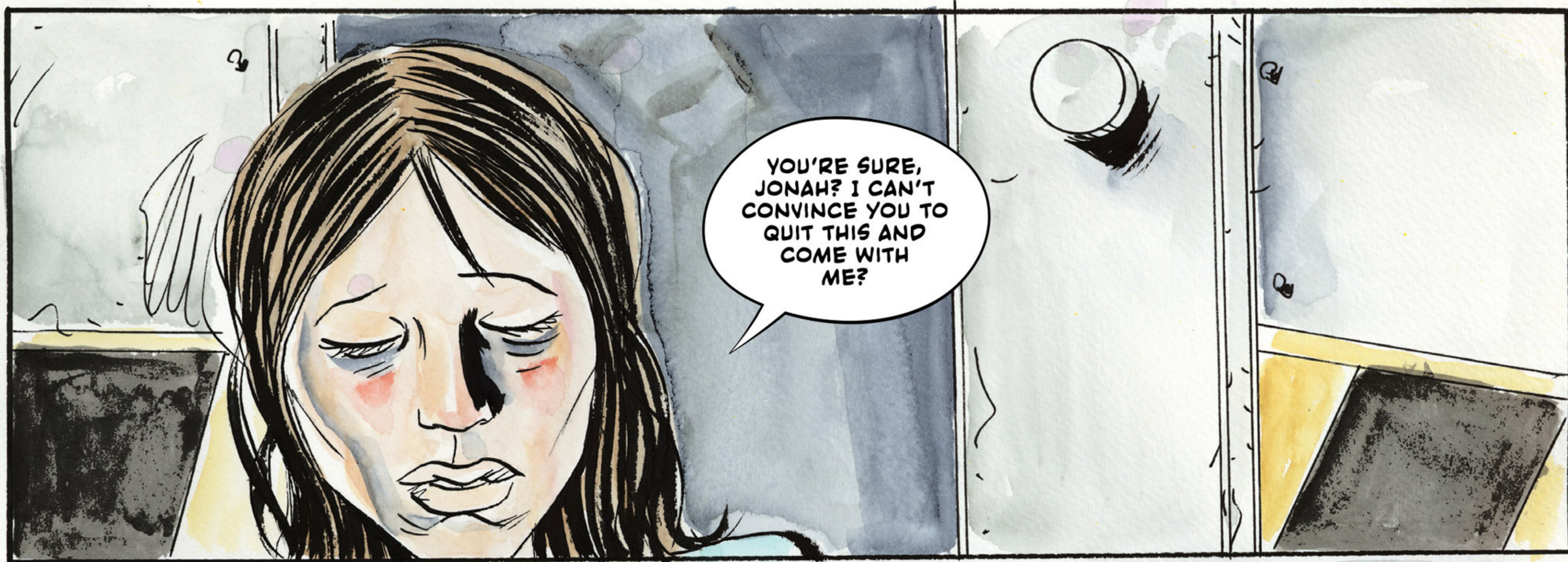
ALL RIGHT, THEN. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

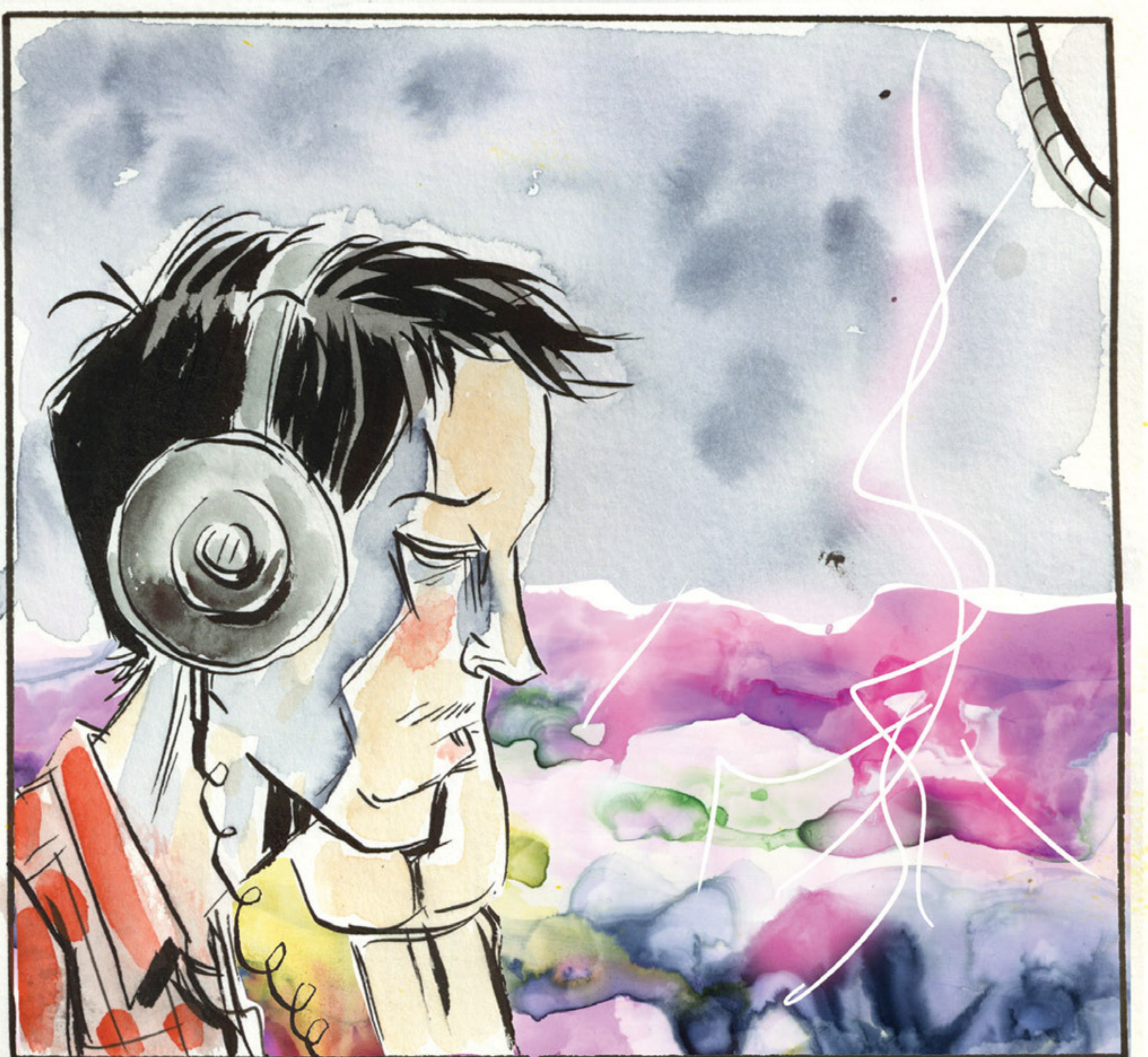
INEZ.

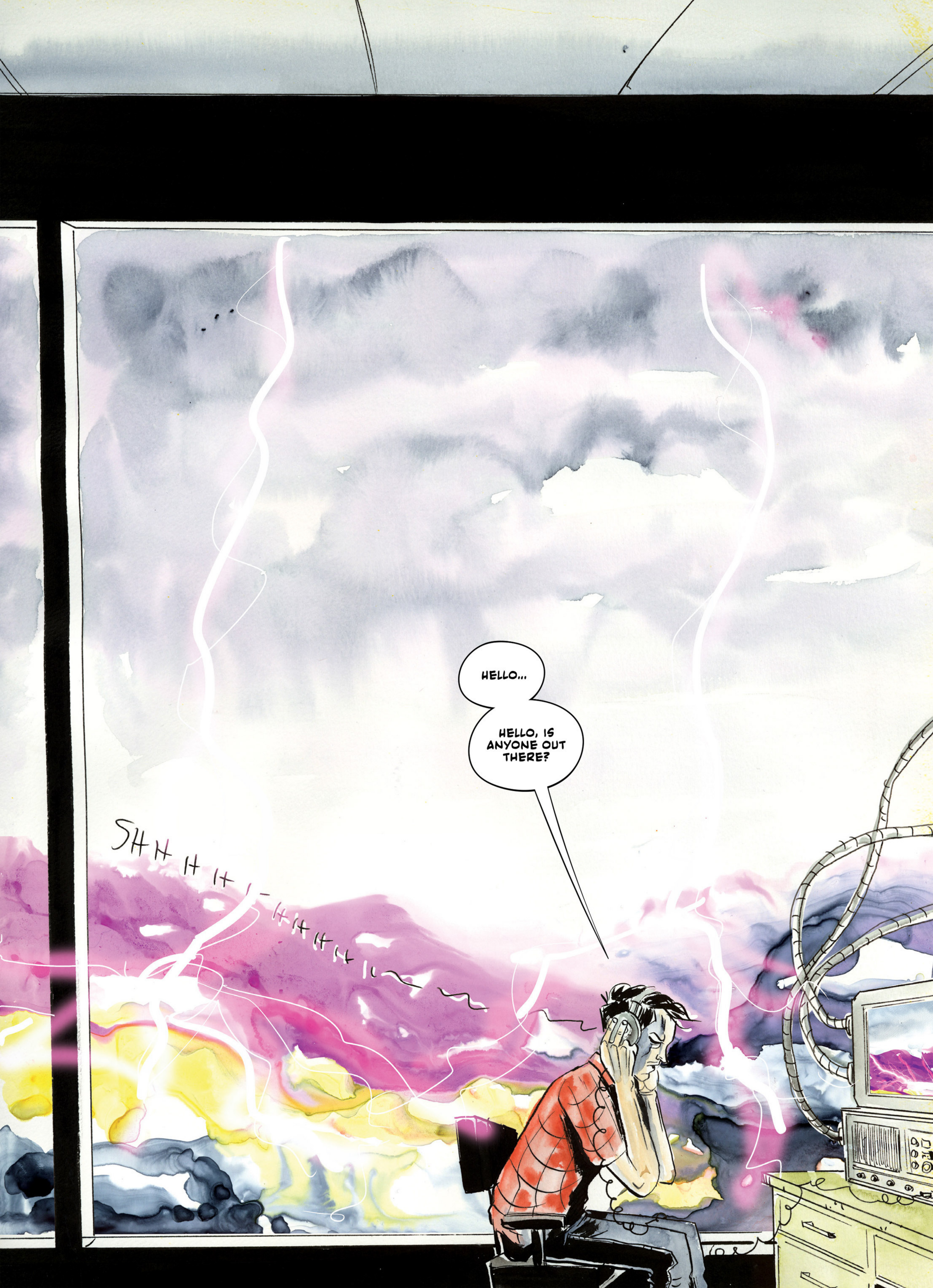


JUST... THANK YOU. FOR EVERYTHING.





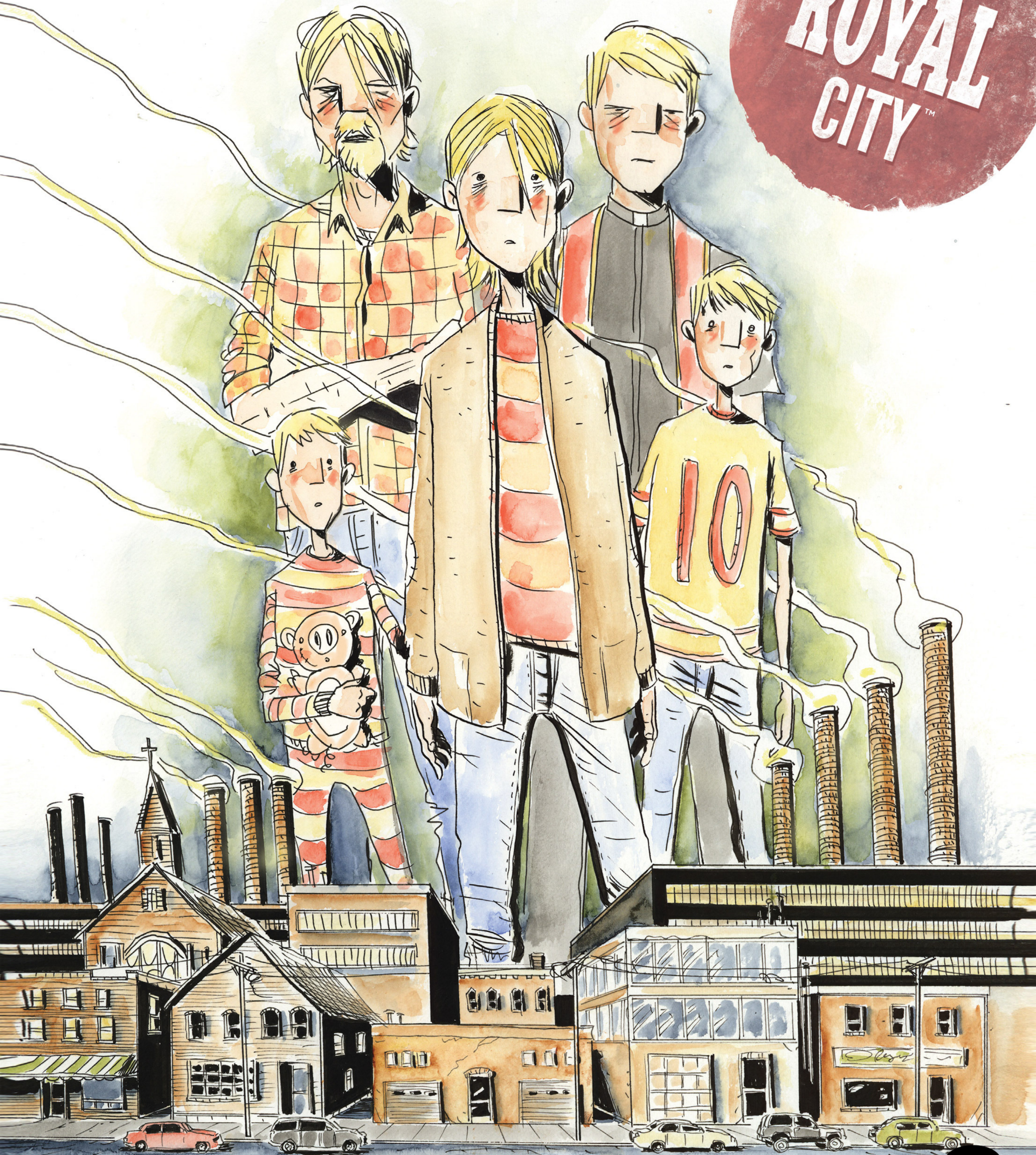






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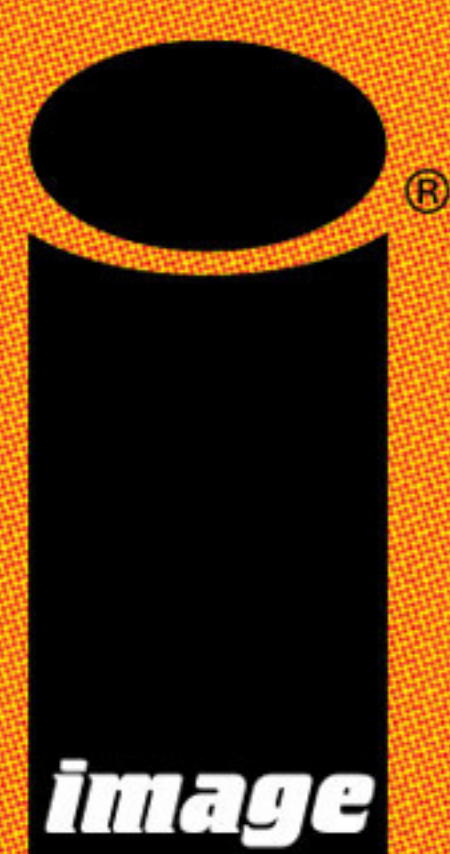
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